This is a reproduction of a library book that was digitized by Google as part of an ongoing effort to preserve the information in books and make it universally accessible.

Google™ books

https://books.google.com

Michael Bray
'Taffrail'

Digitized by Google

LIBRARY OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

823
D735m

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Michael Bray

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

MICHAEL BRAY

BY

TAFFRAIL

Author of Pincher Martin, O.D., The Sub, A Little Ship, H.M.S. "Anonymous," etc.

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LIMITED LONDON

Digitized by Google

Dedication

TO JUDY

NOTE.

Except for Stuart, the chief petty officer of Michael Bray's term in the "Britannia," the author wishes it clearly to be understood that all the characters in this book are fictitious and composite.

MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
BY JARROLD AND SONS LTD. NORWICH

Digitized by Google

823
D735m

THE train, steaming round a curve in the line, passed out of a cutting to speed along the northern bank of the River Dart towards Kingswear.

A grey-eyed, freckled-faced boy in naval cadet's uniform, the sole occupant of a third-class carriage, sat bolt upright with strangely pounding heart and his face glued to the window as the panorama suddenly opened before his eyes. He was young, barely fourteen. His uniform was new, and this first sight of the old "Britannia" from the corner seat facing the engine formed an impression which was to remain for ever in his memory.

It was late afternoon in September. The broad river lay calm and peaceful, shimmering in the rays of a westering sun. A few hundreds of yards distant, moored head and stern in her sheltered anchorage, lay the old three-decker, with the two-decker "Hindustan" ahead of her.

The ships were connected by a covered bridge, and both floated high out of the water, with their every detail mirrored faithfully in the placid stream. To Michael Bray, who had never seen them before, there was something thrilling and romantic in the sight of these old-fashioned vessels, with their chequered black and white sides, figure-heads, and heavy-looking quarter galleries and stern windows, though there was a touch of incongruity in the fact that both were hideously roofed over, while the "Britannia" alone had a single yellow mast and bowsprit, with the usual paraphernalia of yards and rigging.

Astern, swinging idly at her buoy, was the sloop "Racer," a straight-stemmed, barque-rigged little steam

Digitized by Google

vessel painted in the picturesque naval colouring of the day—black hull with salmon-pink waterline finished off with a narrow white ribbon, white upperworks and boats, pale, buff-coloured masts and funnel.

Beyond, on the far bank of the river, some buildings and a boat-house lay clustered on the foreshore. Behind them the ground rose steeply into rolling, wooded uplands, with here and there the green patches of open meadows and the rusty red of newly ploughed fields. To the right, between the hills, the waters of a broad creek shone golden in the sunlight.

It was all very good to look upon; but, to Michael Bray, rather frightening.

Except for a single visit to Portsmouth some years before—a visit which had included hurried expeditions to Nelson's "Victory" and the naval dockyard, this first sight of the "Britannia" was Michael's bow to the Royal Navy. And his heart beat faster as he gazed at her, for it marked an important epoch in his life. Even now he had difficulty in making himself believe that within an hour he would be treading the wooden decks of that very ship, and that, off and on for the next fifteen months, he would have his being on board her.

It all seemed unreal and fantastic—rather like a dream. Six weeks before the navy was altogether remote, something unattainable. It now looked huge and monstrous in the foreground, overshadowing everything else.

He was still the same boy, the same care-free, mischievous, laughter-loving little animal that he had been at school. But by dint of having given proof of a certain standard of knowledge in open competition among his contemporaries, he now wore a blue serge uniform with brass buttons and narrow strips of white silk twist on either side of the collar. Also a cap—with narrow welts and rather like a pork-pie in shape—with patent-leather peak, mohair band, and a truly wonderful and impressive badge of the royal crown surmounting a silver foul anchor encircled by golden leaves of laurel.

Digitized by Google

The possession of that uniform had changed everything. The crown and foul anchor on buttons and cap-badge were the symbols of royalty, of authority, and of the sea. He was no longer an irresponsible boy at a preparatory school, but a servant of his Sovereign, albeit a very humble one whom those in authority might quite easily cast back into despised civilianhood if he failed to display a certain industry and an aptitude for his new profession.

Michael fancied the navy because there was something thrilling about the sea and ships and sailors that he could not for the life of him define, and also because of " Old Pottifer," the drill instructor at school.

Pottifer, who was not really old at all, was an ex-chief petty officer and gunnery instructor, Royal Navy, with a string of medals which the head master, not altogether against Pottifer's will, made him wear on his double-breasted blue jacket at prize-givings and similar functions, for the purpose, so said the irreverent, of impressing any parents present. Pottifer had a wonderful rolling walk, a grizzled-head, a mahogany coloured, clean-shaven face all criss-crossed with tiny wrinkles, pale-blue eyes puckered at the corners, and was a strict disciplinarian with a loud barking voice to those unlucky enough to fall into his clutches for " extra drill." But he was a very kind Pottifer, especially when one caught him in an expansive mood and listened with attention to his yarns of shipwrecks, and collisions at sea, and wars, and desert islands in the Pacific, and savages, and places that nobody, not even Mr. Robertson, the master who taught geography, had ever seen except upon a map.

In short, Pottifer, on duty, was a martinet; but off duty was a jolly good fellow. They all loved him. Analysing it, one is certain that Pottifer was chiefly responsible for Michael Bray wishing to become a naval officer. Such things do happen.

But it was difficult to understand how it had come to pass. By means of an utterly non-nautical examination

Digitized by Google

conducted by pale-faced, black-coated gentlemen in London, at which multitudes of boys presented themselves for about sixty-four vacancies, Michael had been found a fit and proper person to enter upon a naval career. To his own surprise, and to the consternation of his masters at school, he had passed in fifty-eighth. Only Pottifer, adopting a sort of "I told you so" attitude, professed no amazement. "I've had me eye on Mister Bray all along," he said with an air of mysterious certainty, stressing the "Mister" now that Michael could no longer be referred to as "Master." "I knew we'd soon see 'R.N.' after his name."

Of course Michael was proud of himself. For the first time in his life—or the second, if the announcement of his birth be reckoned—he had figured in the newspapers. He had passed in at his first attempt, and many boys he knew of had tried and tried again and had never passed at all. And when the examination result was made public he found himself in a blaze of temporary glory. In the excitement of the moment nobody, least of all himself, really troubled to worry their heads as to his marks or his place upon the list.

If the truth be known, he had scraped in literally by the skin of his teeth. Indeed, if a civilian gentleman in London, tickled by the ingenious naïvety of his answer in the scripture paper to a question on the miracle of Cana in Galilee, and anxious to keep an appointment for lunch, had not erred on the side of leniency in his marking, it is doubtful if he would have scraped in at all.

So before he really understood it the navy had descended upon him, and, by sending him an official paper peremptorily ordering him to join H.M.S. "Britannia" at Dartmouth on a certain date in September, had completely swallowed him up—taken possession of him, body and soul. He would be moulded while still malleable in the fashion which years of experience had showed was best calculated to produce midshipmen out of schoolboys, lieutenants from midshipmen,

Digitized by Google

and commanders, captains, and admirals from lieutenants. The Service was very old and very conservative and very jealous of its tradition. It still caught its officers young, as it did in the days of Nelson, wherein, perhaps, it showed its consummate wisdom.

From now on Michael would cease to have a will of his own. The wishes even of his father would be subservient to those of the State, as represented by the Admiralty. His every coming and going would be regulated and ordered, and he would be drilled, trained, and taught with one aim alone in view—that he might be of use to the navy.

His own likes and dislikes mattered nothing. Self must be obliterated, and he must do as he was told, go where he was ordered, without thought or question. His whole life must be given up to the good of the Service, and if he rebelled, or if the Service found him wanting in any respect, he could be cast ruthlessly aside. It was a case of the survival of the fittest. There were hundreds of others to step into his shoes or to pass over his head if he failed.

He felt a sudden loneliness—a vague longing for companionship and for somebody strong upon whom he could lean; someone from whom he could seek help and guidance in possible adversity. But except for three other cadets from his own school who had passed in with him, boys whose troubles would probably equal his own, there was nobody. One or two cadets in the senior terms had also been at school with him; but it was unlikely that these would do much to help him, for from what Michael had heard there was a great gulf fixed between the humble "news" and the swashbuckling roisterers of the second, third, and fourth terms.

He would have to fight his own battles and plough his own solitary furrow. Altogether it was an awesome feeling, far worse than going to a new school; and for the time his pride and happiness in the glory of his new uniform was a little dulled by the perplexity of the future, the fearful prospect of the great unknown.

Digitized by Google

Michael was very young. Had he thought a little he might have derived some small consolation from the knowledge that he was not alone in his qualms, and that of the odd two hundred cadets who entered the "Britannia" every year there was hardly one, on first joining, who did not suffer the same anxiety.

Michael Bray — *Chapter II*

MICHAEL was an only child and motherless. His father, Sir Julian Bray, an Indian Civil Servant who came home at intervals of about five years, was merely an honorary member in his life. He wrote Michael affectionate fatherly letters, sent him tips on birthdays and at Christmas, and was genuinely devoted to his son. But, undemonstrative and immersed in his own affairs, Sir Julian regarded children as a necessary evil and longed for the day when Michael should grow up to be a man. Small boys, whom he could not understand, bored him, and not possessing the happy knack of endearing himself by encouraging their confidence and satisfying their natural curiosity, soon tired of their company. Big, with a bristly moustache smelling of cigars, aloof and rather severe in his manner, he figured in Michael's life as a sort of amiable ogre, the last person in the world to whom the boy would freely have opened his heart or confided his troubles if he wanted sympathy. Indeed, Michael was frightened of his father.

In a vague kind of way he remembered the mother who had died when he was five years old; but for almost as long as he could recollect he had lived with his Uncle James, his mother's brother, himself a widower. And Uncle James, otherwise the Reverend James Wallingworth, Rector of St. Agatha's in the Surrey village of Bedbury, was not altogether an exciting person in the fiercely intolerant eyes of youth.

Digitized by Google

A thin, jaded-looking man in the late fifties, with grey hair, sparse on top, straggling untidily round his dome-shaped skull, Uncle James was too much of a recluse to be really lovable to children. With long, transparent hands and tapering fingers, nondescript brown eyes with pale eyebrows and lashes, and a colourless face with prominent cheek-bones, he had the general air of a dreamer, as indeed he was. His personal appearance troubled him not at all, and for ever he appeared in the same old clerical suit of faded black, shiny, dusty at the seams, and showing a faint greenish tinge in strong sunlight.

The rector seemed to have lost all joy in life since the death of his wife some years before. Her sudden loss had come as an overwhelming shock from which he had never really recovered, for hers had been the hand which guided his fortunes and managed his affairs. Deep down in his heart he was intensely fond of Diana, his only child, a few months younger than Michael. He was also attached to his nephew; but, like his brother-in-law, failed to understand children and never entered into their concerns and amusements except in a clumsy sort of way which, behind his back, rather excited their derision. He had no real interests in life beyond his parish, his books, and conchology, and Diana and Michael, who were apt to disturb him by invading his study at inopportune moments to ask awkward questions and to interfere with the array of glass jam-jars on the window-sill containing living animalcules from local ponds and ditches, were something of a nuisance without a mother to look after them.

Like many country parsons, the Reverend James was very poor. His private means, accruing to him on the death of his wife in trust for Diana, amounted to no more than one hundred and fifty pounds a year.

Dilapidations haunted the rector's waking moments. There was so much that ought to be done that there was no money for, and had it not been for the generous

Digitized by Google

cheque paid quarterly by Sir Julian's bankers for Michael's upkeep it is doubtful if two ends could have been made to meet at all. As it was the Reverend James periodically examined his pass-book with the fear of insolvency clutching at his heart. However much he pinched and economized, something unforeseen always cropped up to swallow his scanty savings.

Miss Prunella Jenkins, an austere lady of uncertain age and pronounced views on religion, acted as housekeeper as well as Diana's governess. A martyr to dyspepsia, she was never at her best in the early mornings. Indeed, both Diana and Michael, who unremittingly studied the prayer-book in church through their open fingers while the sandy-haired curate intoned the Litany, were firmly convinced that she was the possessor of that somewhat doubtful attribute—" a notorious evil liver."

" Jenks," as they called her, was unpopular both with Diana and Michael. She was a soured woman whose stony heart never unfroze into the milk of human kindness. Unsympathetic and contemptuous of anything approaching femininity she was too severe and too rigid a disciplinarian to be a success with children. Nevertheless, the Reverend James, blind to her faults, thought the world of her. The village gossips said over their tea-cups that Miss Jenkins was deliberately setting her cap at the Reverend James.

" Jenks," said Michael, " is an old beast. I hate her ! "

" I wish father would get someone else to housekeep for him and send me off to school ! " Diana sighed. " If I were a boy they couldn't keep me at home."

Michael looked sympathetic. He could well understand Diana's feelings. It was bad enough to have to put up with Jenks during the holidays. What it must be like for Diana who had her all day and every day, year in and year out, he could not imagine.

" Poor old thing ! " he said. " It's perfectly rotten for you. It's not even as if Jenks were a proper lady, unless, of course, she's what they call a decayed one."

Digitized by Google

Diana snorted. "Ladies never decay," she said solemnly. "Only gentlewomen, and Jenks isn't that. She's got photos of her beastly family in her bedroom. Scrubby-looking pigs, all the lot of them."

"I'm blowed if I know what Uncle James sees in her," Michael grunted. "He thinks she's perfectly splendid."

"That's the worst of it," Diana continued. "Oh, Michael!" she added fiercely, "you don't know what it's like when you're away and I have nobody to go about with. She's always nagging and I'm so awfully miserable. Things never go right, and Father doesn't understand."

"Does he really know what she's like?"

"He always takes her side." Diana sighed. "I told him once what an old beast she was. That time she wouldn't let me go to the concert and conjuror in the schools because she swore by all her gods I'd told a lie."

"And what did he say?"

"Said I should learn to respect those set in authority over me, and that even if I hadn't told a lie I'd been wilful and disobedient and deserved to be punished. He said Jenks had sterling qualities which I was too young to see."

"Sterling qualities my foot!" Michael exploded rebelliously. "She's always sneaking round prying into things which don't concern her, and then running off to tell Uncle James. She's a beastly old snake."

"If I hadn't got you during the holidays, Mike, I don't know what would happen," Diana said sadly. "It's all been so different since Mother died and Jenks came. It's beastly—perfectly horrid!" Her voice trembled.

Michael did not immediately reply. He shyly patted his cousin's shoulder with an odd expression on his face. His heart was bursting with sympathy, and in his boyish way he longed to be able to say something, to do something, to comfort her.

"I wish I could make it a bit better," he stammered at length, and very awkwardly. "I know we fight a

Digitized by Google

good bit over things, and sometimes I've been an awful beast to you."

"Oh, no," she said softly, coming towards him with moist eyes. "You're a perfect darling, Mike, and I love you very much. It's me who's the beast."

"For goodness' sake, chuck it, Diana," said Michael, suspecting her intention of kissing him and retreating hastily. "Don't get sloppy."

Michael, at the age of thirteen, was the last person in the world to appreciate charm in anything feminine and human. He liked to have friends—boy friends for preference—and though, in his peculiar way, he was very fond of Diana, he was readier to admire the mechanism of an air-gun than so futile a thing as a girl.

However, though he would not have admitted it, he could see that Diana was rather pretty. He liked her hair, and the way the light caught its strands as she moved until it shone like burnished metal with every tint from the purest gold to chestnut. He liked her big blue-grey eyes with their velvety pupils and dark curling lashes, and her well-shaped mouth and red lips, her even white teeth, and clear cream and pink complexion. He liked her nose too, a tip-tilted little button of a thing which marred her absolute beauty but gave her an air of innocent impertinence.

In Michael's eyes Diana was handicapped by her sex. He would have liked her to have been a boy, for however friendly he was with her, however much he looked forward to their companionship during the holidays, when they were inseparable, there was always a little something wanting due to the unfortunate circumstance of her sex. What a ripping boy she would have made! With her skirt wrapped round her waist and in her blue knickerbockers she could climb trees as well as the best of them and was a far better shot with a catapult than most. Moreover, she was absolutely fearless, and thought nothing of taking a wasps' nest, or of jumping from swaying stone to stone across the Tillingbourne in flood, when

Digitized by Google

the least slip would have precipitated her into several feet of swiftly running water.

Diana, for her part, found nothing wanting in Michael. On the contrary, in the uncongenial atmosphere of Bedbury Rectory and Miss Jenkins, Michael was all she had—her only really intimate friend. She loved him fiercely, wanted him for her very own. In her heart of hearts she was secretly pleased he was not her brother.

Michael Bray *Chapter III*

MICHAEL ceased to belong to himself from the moment he stepped out of the train at Kingswear—he and a number of other cadets, some of whom he had seen on the platform at Exeter but had studiously avoided in an access of shyness. Like his own, their uniforms were brand new. They glanced furtively at each other without speaking, bashful and very awkward, each hoping that one of the others would break the ice by making the first advances. One, more sheepish even than the rest, wearing uniform that seemed a little different in cut and material to the standard clothing provided by Messrs. Reeves, and with patched boots with toe-caps instead of the plain-fronted variety ordered by the regulations, had his mother with him.

"Silly ass!" thought Michael, watching the lady trying to comfort her gulping son.

Parents were obviously so out of place when one joined the "Britannia," which was not like some pettifogging little private school. Mothers were all very well at home; but here they made one look a fool—and fancy the awful indignity of nearly blubbing in uniform and in public!

It was not until some time afterwards that Michael discovered that Jakes was an only child, and that his mother, the widow of a naval officer drowned at sea, had little besides the scanty pension granted her by the

Digitized by Google

Admiralty. Heaven and Mrs. Jakes only knew how she had striven and denied herself to send her boy to a day school, to get him into his father's profession, and to pay for his expensive " Britannia " outfit. Then it was that Michael felt a beast for not guessing the reason for the patched, non-uniform boots, the monkey jacket and trousers so obviously made by a second-rate tailor, the bright, anxious eyes, pale face, and general air of ladylike poverty about Mrs. Jakes herself. He hated himself for a cad, and forgetting his first antipathy because Jakes cried in public, and because his boots were unspeakable and his clothes peculiar, took him fiercely to his bosom as a friend.

A tall chief petty officer with a harassed expression and a list in his hand came up to Michael and looked him up and down. " Name, sir, please ? " he demanded, sucking a pencil.

Michael, taken unawares, sprang to attention.

" Bray, sir," he answered.

" My name's Stuart, Mr. Bray," said the chief petty officer, the shadow of a smile wrinkling the corners of his mouth. " I'm the chief petty officer of your term, and," he added in a whisper, " you'd best keep the ' sir ' for officers. I'm Stuart."

Michael blushed at his *bêtise*. He really knew better.

" I'm sorry," he excused himself. " I clean forgot."

Stuart took no notice. With one eye on Michael and the other roving over the other cadets he rapped out a string of orders.

" Go to the luggage van and see your portmanteau's put on the truck with the others. Then go straight down to the pontoon and on board a steam launch you'll see there. I'll be along in a minute."

Ten minutes later, her cabin top piled with little black portmanteaux all precisely the same and her stern-sheets full of cadets with Stuart in their midst, the " Osprey " cast off and moved out into the stream. A handkerchief fluttered from the shore. The tears trickled openly

Digitized by Google

down Jakes's face. He had never been parted from his mother before.

"Young gentlemen," said Stuart, when they were well under way, "I should like to say a word or two. I'm your term chief p.o.,[1] an' I shall be with you the whole time you're in the ship. It's my job to look after you as sort o' right hand man to Mr. Bayley, our term lootenant. You'll be feelin' a bit strange at first. The ship isn't like the schools you've just come from, 'cos all the time we're teachin' you to be officers, so the discipline's different.

"But if there's anything you ever want to know, young gentlemen," he resumed after a pause, "just you come along and ask Stuart, that's what he's here for. But don't forget I've always got me eye on you. I know all that goes on. I'll know all your names an' faces inside a week an' I'll never forget 'em. If you misbehave yourselves I've me duty to do the same as anyone else. If you give no trouble and do well I'm proud of you and your friend. I'm always ready to give any young gentleman a helping hand, so don't you go forgettin' it. I'm not much good at makin' speeches, but let's just try and see if we can't make our term the best that ever passed through the 'Britannia.'"

Presently, looking up, Michael found the "Britannia" towering high above him, her great black, old-fashioned, bulging sides picked out with the three broad white ribbons with their square, regularly spaced ports. Once upon a time a gun-muzzle grinned from every one of those ports; but now the teeth were drawn; for they were all glazed over. The ship seemed huge and ponderous and threatening, and now, at the moment of going on board, Michael felt actually frightened. Everything would be strange and new—utterly different to going back to school, where he knew everybody, knew exactly what to do. He felt a little sick—rather as if he were ringing the front-door bell at the dentist's.

[1] Chief p.o. = chief petty officer.

Digitized by Google

Without realizing it he found himself following someone up the broad gangway. He reached the top and stepped on board through the square entry port, luckily remembering to salute, or raising his hand to his cap in what he imagined to be a salute. The ubiquitous Stuart, who had left the boat first, was ready waiting for them, likewise the term lieutenant, a tall, ruddy-faced fellow with twinkling brown eyes and the clean build of an athlete. There was also a fat warrant officer wearing a sword-belt, a couple more chief petty officers, and a marine sentry.

Michael, acutely self-conscious with so many eyes upon him, paused anxiously, licking his lips and wondering what to do next. He glanced round the low gun deck with its massive white beams so close overhead, its spotless white enamelled bulkheads, and twinkling brasswork, the well-scrubbed teak deck white underfoot, with its parallel lines of black caulking, the broad hatchways with their white man-ropes and polished stanchions and an imposing-looking collection of routine and notice boards. There was a strange smell—the mingled odour of tar and paint and clean woodwork and disinfectant and food, with the tang of salt water predominating. It was the unmistakable and unforgettable smell of a ship—a wooden ship. He sniffed.

"Come this way, young gentlemen," said Stuart, taking charge of the latest addition to his flock after a whispered conversation with the term lieutenant. "I'll show you your chests in the 'Hindustan' and the first term readin' room. We'll be havin' our tea before long. Some of us'll be wantin' it after our railway journeys."

They followed meekly.

To be the proud possessor of a sea-chest was in itself rather delightful, far more interesting, Michael found, than keeping one's clothes in a common or garden chest of drawers. It did not occur to him that it was far more difficult to keep a chest tidy, and extremely bad for the clothes. There were two shallow, removable trays in the top, one for odds and ends and the other containing

Digitized by Google

a tin receptacle with a lid holding a small wash-basin and soap-dish—relics of the days before men-of-war ships were fitted with proper bathrooms for such undistinguished people as midshipmen. There was also a small oblong "private till" fitted with a key, in which could be kept private and personal odds and ends, letters, money, and any trifling valuables.

Each sea-chest had its mirror inside the lid, two pairs of hooks for holding the telescope and dirk which one used when one left the "Britannia" and went to a sea-going ship and—relic of the days before electric light—an ornamental brass candle socket.

Later on, when the first shyness wore off, people decorated the insides of their chest-lids with photographs and pictures. Indeed, a fellow was rather judged by his picture gallery, and those with bemedalled fathers in uniform and pretty sisters were greatly envied. Michael restricted his photographs to four: one of his dead mother, another of his father, and the others of Diana—Diana with the hair rippling prettily off her forehead, her large fearless eyes gazing straight into the camera and a half smile on her mouth. People often asked who she was.

Michael never forgot his first night on board a man-of-war. The long lines of bulging, cream-coloured hammocks were slung from hammock-bars over the sea-chests on the "Hindustan's" sleeping-deck, and presently, when a bugle sounded, and Stuart drove them off to bed with his "Time to turn in, young gentlemen! Smart's the word, now!" the place was invaded by a laughing, chattering mob.

Michael was not imaginative; but the sight of the compressed humanity brought a peculiar little flutter to his heart. Without really meaning to, he found himself wondering how many other boys, now officers serving in the far-flung British squadrons throughout the seven seas, had seen precisely what he was now seeing—had felt exactly what he was feeling. In his mind's eye

Digitized by Google

the old ship seemed peopled with the ghostly multitude of his predecessors—some of them midshipmen, some lieutenants, others even commanders, captains, and admirals. It was rather wonderful to think that a proportion of his companions who were now undressing so noisily, laughing at each other as they clambered upon their chests preparatory to scrambling clumsily into the unfamiliar "gams,"[1] must one day, in the dim distant future, also become senior officers themselves. It would be a case of the survival of the fittest, for not all of them could reach exalted rank. Some might leave the service before even they wore the single gold stripes of sub-lieutenants, some would retire as lieutenants, others might be drowned or killed in action. Michael undressed slowly, thinking over these things, before, with a leg up from the fatherly Stuart, he crawled into his own swinging bed.

After his own little bed at home he found a hammock a little constricted and narrow, the horse-hair pillow rather hard, and the hammock itself rather apt to shake when other occupants of the same bar thumped their pillows or stirred uneasily to make themselves comfortable. But it was none the less warm and cosy. There was a delightful smell of tarred rope and clean canvas mingled with the salty odour of the river coming in through the open ports, and, excited though he was, Michael was sound asleep long before the officer of the day, preceded by a chief petty officer with a lantern, passed swiftly on his rounds.

Michael Bray — *Chapter IV*

THEIR first morning on board, after prayers on the poop, the new cadets were interviewed, one by one, by

[1] "Gam"—the "Britannia" slang for a hammock, but used nowhere else. I can find no reason for the name.

Digitized by Google

Mr. Bayley, their term lieutenant, who questioned them closely as to their progress at games, asked them whether they could swim, and gave them much good advice. Already divided into four classes, they were then passed on to their instructors, by whom, after being provided with a multitude of new books, they were presently initiated into the rudiments of those mysterious subjects, trigonometry, navigation, steam, seamanship, and other things too diverse and too numerous to mention. After the morning's work dinner came at one o'clock, and then they were sent ashore for exercise.

The evening of the second day on board provided the most trying ordeal of all, for by this time the senior cadets had returned from leave and the "news" found themselves subjected to incessant cross-examination and chaff, some of it good-natured and harmless and some the reverse.

"Hi! You scabby little new!" Michael was hailed by a lanky boy with bright red hair. "Come here!"

Michael went.

"What's your beastly name?"

Michael told him.

"Where were you at school!" the red-haired one demanded, idly swinging the keys worn on the white lanyard round his neck.

He was duly informed.

"Humph!" he snorted contemptuously. "You're jolly small. It's a deuced pity they didn't make you grow a bit more. Which are you, a pi, tart, or blackguard?"

Michael was puzzled. He knew what being "pi," or religious, meant, and he was not really that. Neither could he lay claim to being a blackguard. But for the life of him he did not know what a "tart" could be, though evidently it meant something midway between the other two. It was equally improbable that his questioner, himself not more than fifteen, was aware of the general meaning of the term when applied to someone of the female sex.

Digitized by Google

" Come on ! " exclaimed Michael's tormentor, scowling fiercely. " I'm blowed if I'm going to be kept waiting by a little brute like you. If you don't buck up and tell me it'll be the worse for you."

" I don't know what it means," Michael confessed. " But as I'm not pious or a blackguard I suppose I must be a tart."

The tall cadet burst into a guffaw. " I say, you chaps," he called to a couple of his friends, " here's a dirty little scab of a new who says he's a tart. What shall we do about it ? "

The pair, intent upon mischief, came over and regarded Michael with suspicion.

" Hm," said one. " He looks as if he'd the cheek of the devil. What the deuce d'you mean by saying you're a tart, hey ? "

" I don't know," Michael answered awkwardly. " I had to be something, hadn't I ? "

" Whew ! That's cheek if you like," exclaimed the red-haired boy with an air of triumph. " He's answered us back. He's evidently a dangerous character, in spite of his size. I vote we court-martial him ashore to-morrow afternoon. We'll make an example of him—what ? "

" Good idea," agreed one of the others.

But their amiable intention was nipped in the bud. Unseen by anyone except Michael a cadet wearing on his sleeve the single gold chevron of a cadet captain had come up behind the group and was listening to what they were saying. His face, somehow, was dimly familiar.

" Yes," said the third inquisitor, a dark, overfed-looking youth with rather an unpleasant expression. " We'll teach the little brute to cheek sixers.[1] We'll bend him over and give him——

" Oh, no, you won't, Hartopp," interrupted a quiet voice behind them.

[1] " Sixers," i.e. third-term cadets. The four terms were known unofficially as " news," " threes," " sixers," and " niners."

Digitized by Google

The three turned round guiltily. For a moment there was an awkward silence.

"We—er—we weren't really meaning to do anything to him, Gresson," the red-haired one explained lamely. "We were only going to rux[1] him a bit, and—er—well, you know, to teach him how to behave, and all that sort of thing."

The cadet captain laughed derisively. "You're a rotten bad liar, Matthews," he said. "And you must think me a pretty silly sort of fool if you imagined I'd believe you. Clear out!" he added. "If I see you trying to rux any more 'news' I'll have you all up as defaulters, so you'd better be jolly careful what you're about."

"You're Bray, aren't you?" asked the cadet captain pleasantly when the others had slouched sheepishly off.

"Yes."

"I thought I knew your face," said the other. "I'm Gresson. You were at school with me ages ago. Don't you remember?"

"Of course!" said Michael, remembering Gresson, the captain of the cricket eleven at the small school he had been at before Carlton House. "But it's nearly four years ago and I'd no idea you were going into the navy. I thought I recognized your face; but you look so jolly different in uniform and have grown such a lot."

They stood chatting together for some minutes, and then Gresson, a "niner," and a person of some importance, turned to move away.

"I say, young Bray," he added, as an afterthought, "I'll look after you. I expect you'll get ruxed a bit; but if anything out of the ordinary happens or you get really bullied you come along and tell me. See?"

"Thanks awfully," said Michael gratefully, not a little proud at being taken such notice of. "It's jolly good of you."

[1] To "rux," i.e., to rag.

Digitized by Google

" Oh, that's all right," said the great man magnificently, stalking off with dignity. " See you later, I expect."

Quite apart from the official rules and regulations, which were voluminous and complicated enough, the " Britannia," like any public school, had a code of laws, customs and traditions peculiarly her own, passed down from generation to generation of cadets.

The " news " and " threes " lived in the " Hindustan " and the " sixers " and " niners " in the " Britannia," while all the four terms did their work apart. They only met ashore and out of working hours and at meals in the messroom in the " Britannia." Unlike a public school, however, where a boy might stay for years, the time spent in the training ship was only fifteen months, so the rise from the lowliness of a " new " to the comparative magnificence of a " sixer " or " niner " was rapid. Neither were there any great disparities in age. Boys who had failed to pass in at their first attempt might find those who had been their contemporaries and classmates at school in the second and third terms when they finally passed into the " Britannia." Nevertheless, between the first and second terms, on the one hand, and the third and fourth, on the other, there was a great gulf fixed.

Woe betide any " new " or " three " who dared to swing the keys worn on the white lanyard round his neck, to wear his cap on the back of his head, or to have his coat unbuttoned or his trousers turned up ashore. Evil might also befall the junior cadet if he dared to occupy certain seats or tables in the canteen ashore or the messroom on board, the latter, when it was not required for meals, being used as a reading- and sitting-room. The life of a " new " or " three," moreover, would not be worth living if he set foot in certain woods held by tradition to be the sacred preserve of the " sixers " and " niners." It was in the fastnesses of these woods that small coteries of lawless characters built unto themselves habitations of boughs and branches known as

Digitized by Google

" sancs," [1] where they concealed such unconsidered and forbidden trifles as the derringer pistols, air-pistols, and catapults, used in the unlawful pursuit of game. Here also they retired whenever they felt so disposed to cook any birds that they slaughtered, to indulge in orgies of gluttony or the forbidden smoking of pipes and cigarettes, and also to court-martial and punish any " news " and " threes " who had offended.

These various privileges, if privileges they could be called, were sacred to the two senior terms. Any attempted usurpation of them resulted in the guilty party being peremptorily ordered to present himself for punishment. Though their use was strictly against the regulations most of the dare-devils of the two senior terms carried concealed upon their persons short lengths of knotted rope known as " togies," wherewith to terrorize and to execute justice.

With all the cadets much the same age there was little real cruelty or bullying, though anything at all *outré* in a " new," from pimples on the face to the wrong sort of boots or tie, might be construed into cheek and punished accordingly. One never felt quite safe from the roving eye of a " sixer " or " niner " ; but one lived and learnt, and some day one would be a " niner " oneself.

It was an unwritten law that " niners," could " fag " " news " and " threes," while " sixers " could " fag " " news." But if a cadet was " fagged " to do anything, legitimate or otherwise, it was an order which had to be obeyed, no matter how inconvenient to himself.

Undesirable as this rough justice may have been, since it might so easily develop into bullying pure and simple, it certainly served a purpose in that it kept junior cadets both humble and obedient. It was contrary to orders, of course, and any cadet found beating another, or reported for so doing, was certain to be haled before the captain with the inevitable result that he himself was officially thrashed in a manner both undignified and

[1] " Sanc," i.e. sanctuary.

Digitized by Google

painful. Nevertheless it continued, for the chance of being found out was so remote as to be negligible.

Fagging, however, was something of a nuisance. Immediately after landing for recreation in the afternoon a "new" might be spotted by a "niner" who intended spending the afternoon in a boat, and ordered to go up to "Stodgers'," the canteen on the playing-fields on the hill-top, and to bring back certain articles of provender with the utmost possible speed. It meant a tiresome journey up the steep hillside by the zigzag path leading past the racquet courts, then on past the beagles' kennels, and across the playing-field to the canteen, a distance of at least three-quarters of a mile. Then, having obtained what was required, the victim rushed down the hill again, and having accomplished the journey in what he thought was record time, arrived breathless to be accused of dawdling by the wayside.

As a means of taking exercise the plan was excellent; but it was galling to have one's time wasted and one's afternoon spoilt in providing for the cravings of someone else's stomach. But orders were orders, and the inevitable result of slackness or disobedience was a summons to the racquet court "forwards," [1] or to a "sanc," followed by the smart application of a togie.

Before he had been a month in the ship Michael was ordered, on pain of dismemberment, to bring on board for a "niner," who, by reason of his misdeeds, was confined on board, six penny squares of a sort of highly glutinous Turkish delight covered with chocolate. The slabs, about two inches square by one and a half thick, were rather difficult of concealment upon the person, while the smuggling on board of food of any kind was a punishable offence. There was always someone in authority at the gangway to scrutinize cadets when they returned from their afternoons ashore, and well Michael knew how

[1] "Forwards"—pronounced "forrards"—apartments which, in houses, are sometimes situated at the end of the passage, so called because in the "Britannia" they were right forward in the eyes of the ship.

Digitized by Google

keen they were. There was a good reason for their zeal, for while some of the smugglers desired the goods for their own and their friends' innocent consumption, others, with a view to making money, sold them on board for " ship's price," or double what they had cost ashore.

Only a week before, indeed, the unnaturally bulbous appearance of a cadet ascending the gangway two or three paces ahead of Michael attracted the attention of Chief Petty Officer Stuart.

" Mister Cook, sir, kindly step this way."

The cadet in question sheepishly obeyed.

" What have we got there, sir ? " Stuart demanded, pointing to Mr. Cook's distended waist line.

" Oh—er—nothing much, Stuart. Merely a——"

" Undo our coat, sir, please."

Mr. Cook, his face a brilliant scarlet, slowly did so. Many packets of chocolate and nougat in silver paper, an entire tin of jujubes and a paper bag containing an assortment of pastries and sausage rolls were tucked into the waistband of Mr. Cook's trousers. They were duly confiscated, and for the next week Mr. Cook spent his afternoons prancing round the parade ground with a heavy bar-bell while other cadets were enjoying themselves, and had his evening meal off unsweetened tea and dry bread at the defaulters' table.

Every sort of dodge had been tried for running cargoes of contraband, even to their concealment inside a disused camera with the works removed. But the lynx-eyed chief petty officers at the gangway spotted them all in turn. There was small chance of evading them—and no mercy when a cargo was intercepted.

" Please, Barnes," Michael stammered nervously, when he received orders to smuggle, " I'd rather not, if you don't mind. It's so jolly risky."

" What ? " the senior cadet demanded, glaring fiercely. " I'm giving you the money for the stuff, aren't I ? If you're not jolly careful what you say I'll beat you for cheek. Anyhow, if that stuff's not off to-night you'd

Digitized by Google

better mind your eye and look out for that stern of yours. Jolly risky, indeed! What's that got to do with it? I've never heard such lip from a beastly 'new.'"

So Michael, sick at heart, was between the devil and the deep sea. If he brought off the sweets and was found out he would be punished officially, for unless Barnes came forward and said he had "fagged" them, which, considering Barnes's reputation, was exceedingly unlikely, Michael could hardly advance the plea that they were not his own. If he did so he would at once be branded as a sneak by his fellows. If he went to Gresson, who was a cadet captain, or to one of the chief petty officers, and told him what he had been ordered to do, Barnes would get into serious trouble; but the result would be equally unpleasant for Michael, for again he would have sneaked. If he did not bring off the sweets at all he would be punished unofficially by Barnes.

The only thing to do was to risk it, and some hours later, with a face of angelic saintliness, a palpitating heart, and the tops of his socks above his boots and underneath his white flannel trousers stuffed with sweetmeats belonging not only to Barnes but also to himself, Michael walked carefully, but with an air of studied unconcern, past Chief Petty Officer Harker at the top of the gangway. It was undoubtedly his look of childish innocence which saved him. What hard-hearted chief petty officer could possibly have suspected the small, curly-haired Michael Bray of being a smuggler? Such wickedness was reserved for bad characters.

"So you've done it, you little devil," Barnes observed, when the booty was secretly handed over after tea. "Not so difficult after all—what? Here you are," he added, handing over a slightly flattened and oozing square done up in silver paper. "You'd better have this for your trouble."

Thus did Michael enter upon a career of crime.

Digitized by Google

THE life, with its many rules and regulations, was very perplexing at first, and the routine, with its bells, bugles, and other unfamiliar things, rather difficult to understand. Every minute of the day was mapped out beforehand. All orders had to be obeyed at the run, and in the mid-morning interval, when classes changed over from theoretical to practical subjects, or vice versa, the ship resounded to the clatter of rushing feet.

Once, before he knew his way about, Michael, trying to find a study where someone taught "stinks," or chemistry, and already rather late, wandered by mistake into a study full of "niners" engaged, seemingly, in mortal combat amidst showers of flying books before the arrival of their instructor. On his appearance in the doorway the uproar ceased, and, if looks could have petrified, Michael would have become a statue.

"Lord!" someone exclaimed joyfully. "Here's Daniel come into the lion's den. Let's pull the clothes off him and bung him in the book cupboard. Old Morton will think he's a mouse!"

No doubt they would have carried out their amiable intention; but Michael did not linger to see. He turned and fled with his head down, nearly butting the fat little naval instructor, Mr. Morton, in the paunch as he tore down the narrow passage.

"Manners, my boy, manners!" said Mr. Morton, fumbling for his spectacles as Michael shot round the corner.

After divisions and prayers on the poop at nine o'clock the terms were marched off to their morning's work, some of them to their studies for theoretical navigation or

Digitized by Google

trigonometry, others to seamanship, steam, chart-work, or the many other subjects which entered into the curriculum.

The routine after the midday meal varied in summer and winter, cadets being sent ashore for recreation immediately after dinner during the short, dark days of winter, and working for a couple of hours later on in the afternoon. These conditions were reversed in the summer.

There were half-holidays on Wednesdays and Saturdays, and on Saturdays no evening work at all. Always there was plenty to do ashore—football, both Rugby and "soccer," hockey, squash racquets, and fives for those who fancied these games, while generally on Saturday afternoons during the season there were football matches and a meet of the "Britannia" beagles, the commander being the master of the pack and certain cadets being selected as whips and wearing the distinctive dress of their office.

The beagles were very popular with local residents as well as with the cadets, and their runs were largely attended. They generally enjoyed fair sport; though once, when the meet was at a large country house and biscuits and sherry were handed round before setting out, the field diminished sadly after a mile or two. Some cadets, quite innocently, had drunk not one glass of sherry, but three or four, and, unaccustomed to such potations, spent the rest of the afternoon in deep slumber in some convenient barn or hayrick.

In summer there was cricket, bathing, and boating. Two large schooner yachts, the "Syren" and "Arrow," manned by volunteer parties of cadets, were also towed down the river on half-holidays for an afternoon's sail outside the harbour. Sometimes the wind failed, and several dismal afternoons were spent by Michael, fearfully and wonderfully seasick, tossing to and fro, up and down, in a glassy swell off the Mewstone.

So long as cadets were ashore for a certain time each

Digitized by Google

day they were free to do what they liked. Games were not compulsory and there was no restriction on their movements beyond their being forbidden to enter the town of Dartmouth and to trespass, though it is to be feared that the latter edict was more honoured in the breach than in the observance.

On Sunday afternoons there were no games, and the news and threes were landed on the opposite side of the river to the senior terms, probably, since there were no other distractions, with the idea of preventing wholesale presecution on a large scale and what were known as "term fights," where an entire term declared war upon another and indulged in a species of vendetta, sparing neither big nor small.

Even as it was, organized fights between rival factions of news and threes were not unknown, and if anyone had a disagreement during the week with a fellow-cadet which required to be wiped out in blood, the decision as to who really was the better man was generally held over until the next Sabbath afternoon. Fighting was prohibited by the regulations. Any personal feud was supposed to be settled in the gymnasium with boxing-gloves, with one of the sergeants standing by as a referee and to prevent too much damage. But making an official matter of a private affair of honour was utterly repugnant to most people, and quite opposed to tradition. The Sunday fights with bare fists were far more exciting. They drew more blood and enlivened the monotony of an otherwise dull day.

It was less than two months after he had joined, indeed, that Michael, goaded to frenzy by some remark hurled at his head by a fat cadet called Johnnie Barker, found himself one Sunday afternoon stripped to his shirt and trousers in a wood with his enemy opposite in the midst of a ring of admiring cadets smoking surreptitious cigarettes. They both had seconds; but neither had any knowledge of the pugilistic art and there were no stupid formalities. They simply went for each other with their bare fists.

Digitized by Google

Johnnie, in spite of his bulk and flabbiness, fought gamely, so gamely that Michael had difficulty in standing up to him at all. His nose bled all down the front of his stiff white Sunday shirt, and before long one of his eyes was swollen and abominably painful. Nevertheless, small though he was, he was in better training than his opponent, and, unable to get home on his face, punished him severely with violent blows in the stomach. And at last, after eight minutes' hard fighting without a stop, a heavy punch in Johnnie's midriff stretched him speechless and gasping on the grass, where presently, having previously gorged himself with cake and chocolate, he was very sick.

Michael had won.

That night before turning in Johnnie, who was not a bad fellow at all, came over to Michael.

"I say, Bray," he said awkwardly, not quite sure how his advances would be taken, "I'm jolly sorry I called you that name."

Michael, his face bruised, cut, and uncomfortable, grinned as well as he was able. "That's all right, old chap," he said. "Perhaps it was my fault for ruxing you first. I hope you weren't hurt much."

"Oh, nothing much. You caught me some nasty biffs in the tummy which hurt a bit; but beyond that I've only a cut lip and one ear a bit swollen. I say, though," he added with some concern, "that poor old eye of yours looks rather beastly. What about some lanolin? I've got a tube in my chest."

"Good Lord, no!" said Michael. "Thanks very much; but don't worry about it. I've bathed it in cold water and it'll be all right in a day or two. Phew! Isn't this shirt of mine in a ghastly mess?" he added, removing his coat and waistcoat and displaying the garment in question. "I've got one of those rotten noses that bleeds every time it's touched, blow it!"

Johnnie laughed.

"I say, Bray," he said after a moment's thought.

Digitized by Google

"Well, old chap?"

"Why can't we be friends?"

"We're not real enemies, you old fathead, if that's what you mean."

"No—o. But I mean proper friends. Let's go ashore together and all that sort of thing."

"By gum!" said Michael, struck with the idea, "it would be rather good sport, wouldn't it? I vote we do."

And they did.

Johnnie Barker was a very likeable fellow. He became Michael's crony and boon companion, and their friendship endured until, as a lieutenant-commander in a battle-cruiser, Johnnie was killed at the battle of Jutland in 1916.

Michael Bray — *Chapter VI*

THOUGH by no means dull, Michael was anything but clever. Unless a subject really interested him he was apt to idle and fritter away his time. Mathematics had always been his bugbear, and on being brought face to face for the first time with such abstruse subjects as spherical trigonometry and theoretical navigation, he did not make the progress he should have.

He assimilated enough by rule of thumb methods to scrape along somehow; but, unlike his cleverer classmates, did not always understand the why and wherefore of what he was doing, and was too proud, too chary of the jibes of his companions and the impatience of his mentor to ask the reason why. In consequence, so far as his work in study was concerned, he remained nearly always at the bottom of his class. Somebody had to be in that unenviable position; but it was unfortunate that it should be Michael.

There were so many other things to interest him and to distract his attention, and, very young, he did not understand how much his future depended upon his success

Digitized by Google

in the perpetual chase of the elusive and highly mysterious *x* and *y*.

When it came to more practical and interesting work, however—things like knotting and splicing, boxing the compass, boat-sailing, learning the marks on the lead- and log-lines, the names and uses of the various ropes and sails in a ship, signals and the colours of the various flags, anchoring and so on—he was more at home. These things, learnt in the model-room, he seemed to have a natural bent for and they appealed to him. Huxtable, the petty-officer instructor, a clean-shaven, stocky, rugged-faced fellow with a voice like the booming of a gale, fierce bristly eyebrows, but a heart of pure gold, regarded Michael as one of the most promising of his pupils. And the opinion of Huxtable passed for something with the cadets. He was a thorough seaman of the old school, who knew the ins and outs of a sailing ship from A to Z, and wore on Sundays the Africa medal with its yellow and black ribbon. He was reputed, in one of the Gambia expeditions, to have killed three natives with nothing more formidable than his bare fists. He was none too free with his compliments—rather the reverse—and it tickled Michael's sense of pride to think that although he might be any sort of a duffer at the theoretical work, he could more than hold his own with the others in seamanship, even with Salter, the top cadet of the class, who had passed second into the "Britannia."

"Now, Mr. Salter, sir," Huxtable would growl, "let's see what we knows about the marks on the lead-line."

"Two fathoms—a piece of leather with two strips; three—a piece of leather with three strips; five and fifteen—white bunting; seven and seventeen—blue——"

"Seven and seventeen, how much?" the instructor would demand with a frown. "We've been on board now over two months and we don't know them marks yet! Shan't we never learn 'em? We'll never make a seaman else!"

Salter would look extremely foolish, while Huxtable,

Digitized by Google

with an air of resignation, glanced round the class for someone else to answer.

"No, Mr. Bray, sir," seeing the expectant look in Michael's eyes, "I knows that you knows that seven and seventeen is marked with red, and I wish we was all so smart at pickin' things up. Now, Mr. Walker, sir, what's the mark at fourteen fathom?" It was a favourite catch-question.

"A bit of blue bunting," at once replied the young gentleman in question, who had been spending the last few minutes gazing pensively out of the port with his thoughts far away.

Huxtable sighed with impatience. "You weren't attendin', sir, and how often am I to tell you that fourteen's a deep, and as sich isn't marked at all! Blue buntin' comes at thirteen fathom, and if you're heavin' the lead and the blue just touches the water you sings out, 'By the ma-ark thirteen!' But if the water cuts the line about a fathom below the white buntin' at fifteen, signifyin' that the depth's fourteen fathom, you calls out, 'By the de-e-p fourteen!' just like that. Why don't some of you backward young gents get Mr. Bray to give you a rub up in your spare time? He knows all about it."

Praise from Huxtable was praise indeed. It caused poor Michael to blush and to feel a perfect fool, though it made it patent to all that although Salter and some of the others could successfully juggle with the sines, cosines, tangents, polar distances, declinations, equations of time, and other fearful things pertaining to trigonometry and theoretical navigation, he, the unimtellectual one of the bunch, more than outshone them in Huxtable's eyes when it came to practical seamanship.

And he was also quick to pick up boat-sailing, carried out in a service cutter on the river, and sail drill aloft in the old "Wave," a swan-bowed yacht moored head and stern close to the "Hindustan" and used only for instructional purposes. Michael had spent so much

Digitized by Google

time climbing trees that scampering aloft and laying out along a slender yard with his feet on the sagging foot-rope had no great terrors for him. It was rather nervous work at first, however, when topgallant masts and royal and topgallant yards were swayed aloft and struck in quick time. Then perched high up in the crosstrees at the topmast head with very little to hold on to and everything moving, one had literally to hang on by one's eyelids as the topgallant mast and upper yards travelled up and down with a run. Huxtable, who in spite of his bulk was as active as a monkey aloft, was generally up there to help, and his presence gave every one confidence.

"There's nothing to be afeared of provided you does what I tells you," he used to say. "It's no more dangerous than ridin' one o' them there bicycles."

Drawing, mechanical and freehand, both of which Michael was rather good at, was taught by two different instructors. The freehand-drawing master, Mr. Walter Panton, a mild, inoffensive man with long hair and a pale moustache, was given to making the quaintest of remarks. On one occasion, for no apparent reason at all, he turned suddenly round upon his astonished class to remark in a fierce, sepulchral whisper that the last cadet who had dared to put out his tongue at him, Mr. Panton, had received for his trouble twelve "knocks" with the cane. The class rocked with amusement.

The tale would not be complete without mention of Mr. William Hamilton, or "Badger Bill," who taught naval history in a manner peculiarly his own. An amusing man with a real sense of fun and a stock of anecdotes, his weekly lessons were popular. Provided the class kept on the right side of him by remembering his system of memorizing dates, a system too complicated to be mentioned here, he avoided all dry-as-dust history and launched forth into the most interesting yarns of the old navy. It was "Badger Bill" who introduced Michael to Fitchett's "Deeds that Won the Empire" and "Fights for the Flag."

Digitized by Google

The elementary instruction in steam, too, taught by an engineer officer, also interested Michael, though his was no mechanical mind. The more theoretical part of the work they learnt in a classroom in the " Britannia," though sometimes they fired the boilers and tended the engines of the ancient " Wave " or went for a trip in the steam launch " Otter " to learn stopping, starting and reversing.

It was all great fun and all intensely novel, and if it had not been for Michael's fatal inability to concentrate upon subjects which did not really interest him he would have felt perfectly happy so far as his work was concerned. Nevertheless, although he was not aware of it, although he had dismal visions of failing in the examination at the end of the first term and of being " warned," [1] he was not creating a bad impression with those that really mattered.

His character at this time could best be summed up by the opinion of his term lieutenant, who, with the commander, was running through a list of names with a view to selecting a whip for the beagles, or some similar purpose.

" By the way," said the commander, " what sort of a boy is that little Bray of yours ? He's never been in serious trouble and seems a good little chap, but Aslmore, his instructor, tells me he's a bit of a juggins at his theoretical work."

Mr. Bayley thought for a moment before replying.

" Bray's very keen, sir," he answered. " He may not be much of a bookworm, but he's very much all there when it comes to seamanship and other things. He's keen on games, too, though not much good at any of them. He's small for his age, of course ; but he'll grow quick enough. He's all right, though, and his heart's in the right place, sir."

[1] " Warned "—if a cadet failed to make satisfactory progress an official intimation was sent to his parents warning them that he might have to be withdrawn if no improvement was made.

Digitized by Google

" I'm glad to hear it," the senior officer replied. " We can do with all sorts in the Service, Heaven only knows. I was no ' *x*-chaser ' myself. I'll tell Ashmore what you say and ask him to rub him up in his bookwork."

If only Michael could have heard !

Michael Bray — *Chapter VII*

WONDERFUL and mysterious though it all was, Michael rapidly adapted himself to the new order of things. The unfamiliarity of the life wore off. He soon began to make friends ; soon discovered which sixers and niners it was well to avoid, and what he could and could not do without being called upon to pay the usual penalty for " cheek."

Regularly every week he wrote little letters to Diana, beginning always " Dear Diana, I hope you are quite well." During his third term, in the early summer of 1898, Uncle James and Diana came down to Dartmouth for a few days to see Michael. Uncle James had an earnest talk with " Holy Joe," otherwise the Reverend William Shrubb, the chaplain, who prepared Michael for his Confirmation the previous Easter and had considerably mystified him by persistent cross-examination as to his " besetting sin," an intimate question to which Michael did not know how to reply. Uncle James, however, professed himself so gratified with the chaplain's report of Michael's spiritual welfare that he presented him with a tip of five shillings.

Michael's cup of happiness was nearly full when, in all the glorious independence of a sixer, he proudly showed Uncle James and Diana round the ship, and took them up to the playing-fields on Saturday afternoon to see a cricket match. It was in the course of this that Diana made a *faux pas*.

" Oh, Michael ! " she said gaily, drawing his attention

Digitized by Google

to a small cadet with distended pink cheeks gorging himself from a paper bag, "do look at that dear little boy over there."

Michael looked. "Well," he grunted, "what of him?"

"Do you think we could ask him to tea with us? He looks perfectly sweet."

Michael snorted with contempt. "Him!" he exclaimed. "Lord, Diana, whatever are you thinking of? The rotten little brute's a scabby new. What would the other chaps think of me if we went talking to him?"

Diana laughed. "I call it silly," she said.

"What's silly?" he demanded fiercely.

"Oh, nothing," she said sweetly. "I'm not going to quarrel on a lovely day like this; but it is stupid all the same."

Michael, rather offended, did not condescend to reply. Girls were peculiar things. They never understood the niceties of etiquette and tradition. As for taking a fancy to that fat-faced, stodgy little beast Molliner—— Lord!

Those days in the "Britannia," looking back on them, were happy days—days brimful of incident and novelty. The work was hard; but it alternated so well with amusement and there was so much variety that one never had much time to become stale. Always there was something to look forward to—the periodical entertainments or theatricals, the sports in the Easter term, the annual whole holiday on the Queen's birthday, May 24th, and games all the year round.

There was the cruise in the "Racer" in the third term, when Michael and his class-mates went to sea in that venerable sloop to gain some little idea of the way of a ship at sea and life afloat generally. The cruise only lasted a week, but they visited the Channel Islands and Portsmouth, proceeding sometimes under sail, sometimes under steam. The cadets scampered aloft and swayed precariously on the royal and topgallant

Digitized by Google

yards. They clambered over the futtock shrouds, reefed topsails—went through all the gamut of the old masts and yards seamanship that could be crammed into the brief time available. Also they learnt how to be marvellously seasick in a heavy south-westerly swell rolling up-Channel.

Michael, though he had bouts of depression and weariness, loved the life. The terns flashed past. So did the regular leaves, and it seemed an absurdly short time before he found himself a " niner " and was beginning to dread the terrors of the final passing-out examination.

He had grown little in stature since joining the ship, and was still one of the smallest cadets on board, going by the name of " The Pocket Hercules." But he had filled out and had become slightly huskier about the voice, and had gained enormously in self-confidence and self-reliance. Much of his original shyness had gone, and though he had not been really brilliant in anything and had naturally not been selected as a cadet captain, he was still a fellow whose word and opinion were rather respected.

Came December, 1898, and the arrival from Plymouth of three smart little training-brigs, sailing ships pure and simple, whose commanding officers conducted the viva-voce seamanship examination. Michael was not in much fear of that; but sat down to his papers in fear and trembling by reason of his slender knowledge of theory. He need not really have worried. A good deal of what he had been taught had stuck in his mind, and he knew enough to worry through somehow. He did really well in seamanship, French and drawing, actually obtaining a clasp-knife with a fearsome-looking marline-spike as a prize for seamanship and a leather writing-case for French.

He did not pass out a midshipman with the full eight months' " sea time " to his credit. He obtained five months' " sea time," which meant that on joining his first sea-going ship the following January he would still be

Digitized by Google

a naval cadet at the munificent pay of one shilling per diem. He would have to wait until April 15th, before he shipped the white patches of a full-blown midshipman and had his daily remuneration increased by ninepence.

Nevertheless he had achieved something to be proud of. He was not in the first flight—nowhere near it; but it was with feelings of tolerable pride and satisfaction, after the results had been made public on his last afternoon on board, that Michael went down to his chest on the sleeping-deck, took off his turn-down collar and lanyard, hall-marks of the "Britannia" cadet, and donned the straight up-and-down "choker" collar, sign of his newly found manhood. And having done so he gazed pensively at his reflection in the mirror in the lid of his chest, twisting his head from side to side the better to enjoy the effect. The collar was a little uncomfortable; nevertheless—vastly becoming.

He thoughtfully felt his virgin chin, wrinkling his brow in troubled thought as his fingers strayed over its smoothness. His expression changed to one of joy when, on removing the looking-glass and peering closely into it beside an electric light, he discovered an almost imperceptible golden down on his upper lip.

"Gosh!" he murmured to himself, "I wonder if I could really start a razor?"

He was only fifteen and three months.

There came the final interview with the captain, who presented them with their passing-out certificates and said a few words of farewell to each one. There were further good-byes to Mr. Bayley, their term lieutenant; Huxtable, the seamanship instructor; Stuart, the chief petty officer; old Johnnie Dunn, the blue-boat man; Saunders, Mrs. Saunders, and Saunders *fille* up at "Stodgers'"; old Johnnie Farr, the ex-bluejacket waterman, whom "the Lord didn't love," according to himself, and who so often had ferried Michael off to the ship for the usual tariff of one halfpenny—these, and a host of others.

Digitized by Google

And in parting with them all Michael somehow felt he was leaving friends. However dour and strict they may have been during term time, they were now smiling and full of good advice, wishing him the best of luck and a happy ship when he went afloat. Michael, though phlegmatic and unemotional, was affected by their kindness. It was glorious to be going to sea; but he hated leaving them behind and starting all his troubles afresh.

There came the last hurried breakfast on board the old ship, the trip down the river to Kingswear railway pontoon in the crowded "Osprey," and the usual fight for seats in the special train. Followed the sudden display of many rolls of perforated paper as "paying-off pendants"[1] as they steamed out of the station and the production of forbidden pipes and cigarettes. But neither the delicious feeling of freedom nor all the tobacco in the world could quite remove the lump from Michael's throat as the train swung round the curve and the old "Britannia" disappeared from sight. She was his first ship, and in some mysterious way he had come to love her.

Six and a half hours later, however, when he stepped out on to the platform at Bedbury to find Diana waiting for him he had quite recovered his usual buoyant spirits. It was good to see her again—delightful to think that for something like three weeks or a month he would have her with him every day.

"Oh, Mike!" she exclaimed, throwing her arms round his neck and hugging him for all the world to see, "I am glad to have you back—so jolly glad! And look at your lovely new collar!"

"Get out, Diana, you're tickling!" He laughed, giving a perfunctory peck at her cheek and slowly disengaging himself. "I wish you wouldn't carry on like that with all the porters looking on."

[1] "Paying-off pendant"—a specially long pendant, sometimes hundreds of feet in length, flown by time-honoured tradition by H.M. ships when ordered to pay off.

Digitized by Google

" By gum, though ! " he added with a sigh of utter content, " it's ripping to be back again ! "

His eyes sought his cousin's and strayed over her face.

" I say," he blurted out, noticing her pretty colour, her hair and the mischief dancing in her eyes—" I say, you are looking ripping to-day. What have you been doing to yourself ? You've changed somehow."

" I wasn't aware of it," she said, smiling at him.

" You're deuced pretty, anyhow," Michael said. " You are still my—er—my best girl, aren't you ? There's no other man you care about, is there ? "

" You funny old thing," she said affectionately, dimpling with pleasure and giving his arm a squeeze. " Of course I'm your best girl. There's nobody in the world quite the same as you."

" Honest Injun, Diana ? "

She nodded.

" But tell me all about the exams and everything," she went on to say. " I'm simply dying to hear. I've been rather anxious since that last letter of yours. You seemed so fearfully depressed."

" Oh, don't let's talk about rot like that," said Michael. " Let's gas about ourselves. I passed all right."

And before the station fly turned in at the rectory gate Michael, in the darkened interior with his arm comfortably round Diana's waist, had realized that fifteen months in the " Britannia " had taught him more than the mere rudiments of his profession. He was beginning to grow up, and to understand there was something rather delightful about girls. And Diana was eminently attractive. He loved the way she looked at him, the way her eyes twinkled and the little curls and tendrils of hair grew at the back of her neck. He knew it was in his heart to be jealous, desperately jealous, if anyone else so much as dared to look at her in his presence.

Yet in no sense of the word was he in love. He did

Digitized by Google

not know what love was; but merely felt a peculiar joyousness and an uplifting of the spirit because he happened to be with her, for somehow he felt that she was his.

"Oh, Diana!" he said softly, snuggling a little closer, "I am so fond of you."

And Diana said nothing; but squeezed his hand in reply.

Michael Bray — *Chapter VIII*

A GREY, bitter day in January, cold and inhospitable. The wind, blowing strong from the south-west, swept in over the Chesil Beach in piercing gusts, so that even in the sheltered anchorage between the Isle of Portland and the mainland the slate-coloured water was whipped into white horses. Leaden-looking clouds, ragged and frayed into streamers by the gale, scurried in from seaward and drove dizzily across the sombre sky. Occasional blinding rain-squalls all but blotted out from view the great battleships and cruisers moored out in the roads.

Michael had been appointed to the battleship "Hamilcar" of the Channel Squadron, and on acknowledging his appointment to his new commanding officer had been ordered to join at Portland. His sea-chest containing most of his belongings had been sent on board beforehand, and with the rest of his luggage, including a new uniform tin-case which marked him as an officer and of which he was rather proud, he had travelled down in plain clothes. After changing into his uniform round jacket and new shining dirk at a hotel he sallied forth in his greatcoat, and 2.45 p.m. found him waiting on the pier for the boat which he had been told would be sent in to take him on board. As yet there were no signs of her, and shivering even in his thick outer garment he stood

Digitized by Google

on the pier beside his little pile of luggage, wondering which of those great ships in the harbour was his new home.

Several naval boats came to the pier while he waited. One thirty-two foot cutter, rigged in the usual naval fashion with dipping lug forward and standing lug aft, came driving through the short, snappy little sea like a racehorse, heeling over with the spray flying half-way up her masts and her close-reefed sodden canvas bellying out in hard curves in the strong wind on her beam. The heads of her crew, barefooted and sitting on the bottom-boards to keep their weight low, could just be seen over the gunwale, and in the stern-sheets the small midshipman in charge, in dripping oilskins and sou'wester, put all his weight on the long tiller as he steadied his heavy boat in the squalls. Nearer and nearer she came, until Michael could read the name "Jupiter" on her scrubbed white backboard, and recognized in the midshipman a boy who had been a sixer in the "Britannia" when he was a new.

A ticklish piece of work followed. The boat was making for the pier, and the only billet available was one between a steam launch and a coal lighter, a space barely longer than the cutter herself. It was rather thrilling to watch. If she came in too fast and could not check her way she must inevitably crash into the stern of the steamboat and smash her own stem-piece. If she had not way enough she would probably miss the pier altogether, to drive helplessly down to leeward among a cluster of wherries and small craft moored in the shallow water. There was no room to manœuvre.

But the midshipman, small though he was, had done this sort of thing many times before. He knew his business after months of sailing a boat in all sorts of weather, and if he was a boy in years he was a man in responsibility, and shouldered it lightly. It was not until he was about twenty yards off the spot he wished to reach that he gave an order which galvanized his crew

Digitized by Google

into sudden activity, for they bobbed up on to their thwarts like so many jacks-in-boxes and sat like oil-skinned graven images, each man with his gaze fixed on the imperturbable youngster in the stern and waiting for his next order. They knew exactly what to do. Halliards and topping-lift were ready in hand.

The "snotty," measuring his distance, still hung on under full sail. The boat, travelling like a locomotive, was soon abreast of the end of the pier, and Michael, holding his breath, could have sworn that the next few moments would see an unholy smash.

Ten yards. . . .

There came another order inaudible in the wind, and the sausage-shaped fenders on their lanyards leapt out as one along the boat's side. Then the crew started to hustle. The foresail came down with a run and was gathered smartly in. The foremast, pivoting in its tabernacle, tumbled aft. Bracing himself against the tiller the little officer nodded, and the mainsail was topped and the wind spilt out of the sail with a thrashing of wet canvas. It had been judged to a nicety, for the boat slid gracefully into the narrow billet and nudged the stone pier with her fendered side so lightly that the impact would hardly have cracked an egg. It was thrilling and fascinating to watch—beautifully done.

A couple of drenched stewards got out of the boat with their market baskets and burnished milk-cans. A couple of men started baling out the water which was well over the bottom-boards, while the snotty, after flapping his numbed arms like a cabman, removed the sodden towel from round his neck and nonchalantly wiped the spray from his streaming face. From the look of him he could not have been more than sixteen; but the fact that he, and he alone, was responsible for his crew and passengers in weather in which the least mistake might result in the boat being capsized and men being drowned, did not appear to worry him in the least. Completing the drying of his face he replaced the towel round his neck and

Digitized by Google

buttoned his oilskin at the throat. Presently, having grinned at Michael and waved a hand in recognition, he turned his boat and was driving her out through a heavy rain-squall on his way back to his ship.

Michael, watching with the eye of an embryo seaman, was lost in admiration for the manner in which the boat had been handled. He was not a little envious, and prayed that he also might some day be vouchsafed an opportunity of showing his prowess. He was to have his chance before very long.

At last a white-painted picquet-boat, ploughing through the seas with the spray driving high over her polished brass funnel, hove in sight off the pier-head. She came alongside the coal lighter and a rush of white water boiled up round her stern as her reversed propeller thudded to check her way. On the roof of the small cabin aft was a white lifebuoy bearing the name "Hamilcar."

The midshipman of the boat, a short, stocky fellow, over eighteen years old, clambered ashore across the coal lighter and stood for a moment with his hands on the hips of his streaming oilskins, looking Michael up and down. His gaze was none too friendly; in fact, he was scowling.

"Lord! Are you our new wart?" he demanded aggressively, anger smouldering in his eyes.

"My name's Bray," Michael answered, very humbly and not a little puzzled as to what a "wart" might be. "I'm a naval cadet. I was told to be here at two forty-five to join the 'Hamilcar.'"

"The devil you were!" snapped the "snotty." "Well, my young friend, just you understand to start with that all naval cadets and junior snotties are mere 'dogs' bodies' and 'warts,' loathsome worms, useless excrescences on the face of nature. You'll soon find that out on board, so don't get cocking a chest and thinking you're mighty smart and useful simply because you've got a new dirk on! We'll jolly soon rub the shine off it,

Digitized by Google

I can tell you. Sparkes ! " he went on, turning to hail the coxswain, " a hand up here for Mr. Bray's gear, and smart about it."

" Look here, Mr. Blooming Bray," he continued, " I've a bone to pick with you already. To-day's Thursday—a make and mend. Don't suppose you know what that means—what ? "

Michael was forced to admit his ignorance.

" Lord alone knows what they teach you in the ' Britannia ' nowadays ! " The midshipman sighed contemptuously. " A ' make and mend ' is an afternoon off, so called because the men are supposed to spend it in titivating their bally wardrobes and making clothes, but really get their heads down on their mess-tables and go to sleep. Make and mends apply to snotties as well, and here am I, a senior snotty, rousted out in the middle of my afternoon caulk to bring you on board ! Why couldn't you have joined at a reasonable hour in the forenoon ? "

" I'm really awfully sorry," Michael apologized. " You see, I was told to join to-day, and this is the earliest time——"

" I don't want to hear your rotten excuses ! " broke in the young gentleman impatiently. " Why should I have to fetch and carry for a blasted crab of a naval cadet, I should like to know ? Another wart, a fat little devil called Barker, joined this morning. My blooming oath ! "—he added bloodthirstily—" how I long to give him a good taut dozen on that stern of his ! I'll do it before long. You as well, blast you ! I'm damned if I know what the service is coming to in these days, what with senior snotties having to run special boats for naval cadets. Dammit ! "

Michael was no fool. He realized that the snotty's bad language was merely being used for effect, to impress and to frighten him. But he was not very impressed. Evidently profanity was the fashion. With a little practice he himself could be quite good at it.

Digitized by Google

" How else should I have come off unless I came in a boat ? " he inquired innocently.

The senior midshipman glared. His mouth opened wide in astonishment. Was Michael merely being impertinent, or was he really asking for information ? He couldn't tell, for the expression on the younger boy's face was absolutely guileless.

" Get off ! " he exclaimed. " What do I care how you get off ! You can swim for all I care. But for heaven's sake don't stand there arguing. Get a move on. Your gear's down in the boat."

Michael followed him across the coal lighter and into the picquet-boat.

" You'd better go aft and stow yourself in the cabin," the snotty grunted. " We'll be taking it in green on the way off. And if you take my advice you'll keep clear of the weather windows. They leak like the deuce."

His tone was a little kinder, and Michael thankfully took shelter in the tiny cabin off the stern-sheets.

" Look here, Bray," said the midshipman, following him inside, " my name's Somers. I'm the second senior snotty in our gunroom and I've been at sea nearly three years."

Evidently Somers considered himself something of a personage.

But Michael did not reply. There was nothing that he could say. He merely endeavoured to look suitably impressed at Somers's vast seniority while allowing him to do all the conversation.

" I've been running this blessed boat since half-past five this morning without a break," the elder boy continued. " I got breakfast at ten o'clock instead of eight and no lunch to speak of. I looked for a bit of a stand-easy this afternoon, so you mustn't be surprised at my being a bit ratty at being dragged out to fetch you."

" I'm sorry," said Michael. " It's awfully good of you."

" Let me tell you you're deuced lucky to get a boat at

Digitized by Google

all," Somers went on, smiling for the first time. "The commander forgot to tell the officer of the watch. However, there's no ill-feeling, sonny," he added condescendingly. "I rather like the look of you after that fat little devil Barker. If there's anything you want to know on board, or if you want any help, come along to me."

"Thanks awfully. It's jolly good of you."

"Oh, that's all right, my son," said the other, settling the sou'wester tightly on his head. "We'd better be shoving off. Someone will have my guts for a necktie if we're late."

With which picturesque expression he left the cabin and clambered along the deck to the wheel.

There came the sharp tinkle of the engine-room gong, and the stern of the boat began to vibrate as the propeller went astern. She backed out stern first, splashing the water into her stern-sheets, and a few moments later, having circled round, was driving at full speed back to the ship, lurching and pitching dizzily with green seas breaking over her low deck, the spray flying over her in sheets, and the water slopping in through the cabin windows. The motion was depressing. Michael became white about the face and began to yawn repeatedly. The smell of oil and paint in the cabin mingled with the odour of the sodden horsehair cushions unnerved him. It would be awful to join his first ship in a state of utter sea-sickness.

It was lucky that the trip was only a short one. A few hundreds of yards more and he must have succumbed.

Michael Bray — *Chapter IX*

THE vibration of the picquet-boat suddenly ceased as speed was reduced, and peering out through the cabin door Michael saw they were circling round the stern of a great battleship floating squat and motionless on the

Digitized by Google

water. The name "Hamilcar" appeared in large gold letters on a scroll on her stern-walk.

So this was the "Hamilcar." For the past three weeks, ever since Michael had received his official appointment and had read the announcement in the newspapers, she had been nothing but a name. Now, with the huge bulk of the ship herself before his eyes she was something very tangible. Fifteen years later Michael was to see battleships and battle-cruisers nearly two and a half times the displacement of the "Hamilcar" without thinking anything of it.

The picquet-boat, easing down, slid alongside the accommodation ladder leading to the quarter-deck, and Somers, motioning to Michael to follow, climbed out of the boat and ascended.

The rain had ceased. Going up the scrubbed white steps with the nervousness of unfamiliarity clawing at his heart, Michael presently found himself at the summit, where instantly he became an object of interest to two grinning midshipmen on watch in round jackets and dirk belts, youths whom he remembered as having been in the "Britannia" with him. Saluting the quarter-deck as he stepped over the polished nameplate he followed Somers to where a good-looking, dapper lieutenant in frock-coat and sword-belt with a telescope under his arm was walking up and down under the sodden awning.

"Picquet-boat returned, sir," said Somers, saluting.

"Make fast," said the officer of the watch, flicking a finger at the peak of his cap. "You'll be required again at four to land the patrol at Weymouth. Warn your crew."

Michael, taking his cue, stepped forward and saluted.

"Mr. Bray, sir. Naval cadet. Come on board to join," he said, repeating the formula he had been warned to say.

The lieutenant, answering his salute, looked at him for a moment with a quizzical expression. There was kindliness in his eyes and a smile lurking round the corners of his mouth. He was amused at Michael's

Digitized by Google

cherubic face and small stature, which, to be exact, was four feet nine and a half inches—quite the smallest thing in sea-going naval cadets the lieutenant had ever seen.

"Very good, Mr. Bray," he said solemnly, his eyes twinkling. "Come along with me. You must report yourself to the commander."

They crossed the quarter-deck, passed the after barbette with its pair of twelve-inch guns, and went through a door leading into the superstructure, to halt before the curtained doorway of a cabin. The lieutenant rapped sharply.

"Hullo?" said a voice.

"New naval cadet come on board to join, sir."

"Let's have a look at him," said the voice.

Michael, removing his cap, stepped inside and stood strictly to attention. The commander, with a fox terrier on his lap, was seated reading comfortably in a low arm-chair with his legs stretched out before the blazing stove. He was a short, powerfully built man in the late thirties, with tanned, clean-shaven cheeks and untidy hair already going grey over the ears. His mouth was very straight, his jaw determined, and his eyebrows bushy and unkempt; but the severity of his face was mitigated by the expression of his blue-grey eyes.

Rolling over in his chair for a better view he looked Michael up and down for a moment without speaking.

"Well, young man," he said at length, "there's not much of you. Are you Bray?"

"Yes, sir."

"Sorry to have kept you waiting for a boat; but it couldn't be helped. How's the wind, by the way?"

"Still blowing hard, sir."

"Where from, boy?"

"South-west, sir, I should think," said Michael, drawing a bow at a venture.

"Good!" said the commander, with obvious approval. "I wasn't asking because I didn't know; but merely to see where you kept your eyes. This is your first ship,"

Digitized by Google

he continued, eyeing Michael with a peculiar half-smile. "You'll find you've got a good deal to learn before you're much use to anyone. Sometimes you'll think I'm an old fool——"

"Sir!" said Michael, rather surprised.

"You needn't look at me like that." The commander laughed. "You may not think it now; but you will in a week or two. I was once a naval cadet myself, remember, and I hated all commanders like the devil. I know what the young gentlemen here in the gunroom think. I know—everything; everything, that is, that goes on on board this ship. But bear in mind, I am neither very ancient nor excessively foolish. Sometimes, I expect, you'll think I'm cruel to you young gentlemen. But you mustn't mind that. It's all for the good of the Service, and I expect my young officers to be smart and obedient. When they aren't, and when they make fools of themselves, I just chase 'em and make their lives a misery. However, let's hope I don't have to chase you. You'll soon settle down and get used to the life, and the other midshipmen will look after you and tell you what to do. Do you know anyone else in the gunroom?"

"Yes, sir. Some of them were in the 'Britannia' with me."

"So much the better. You can have to-morrow to look about you and to 'sling your hammock'; but the day after you'll take your turn of duty with the others. The senior midshipman will tell you your stations. Run away, boy. Ask the midshipman of the watch to show you the gunroom and your chest and so on."

The commander lifted his book to signify that the interview was at an end, and Michael, taking the hint, retired.

Presently, under the guidance of one of the midshipmen of the watch, he was being conducted below. Going down two ladders they found themselves in the gunroom flat, a compartment painted in white enamel and illuminated only by electric light, and the deck space of which

Digitized by Google

was practically taken up by rows of the midshipmen's sea-chests.

"Here we are," said the guide. "That's your chest in the far corner there, and I'll send along for your servant and he can unpack your gear. He's one of the bandsmen, and you'll have to pay him ten bob a month for looking after you. Take my tip and be jolly careful to leave none of your gear sculling about and to keep your chest locked," he added in a friendly whisper. "Number One's [1] a perfect devil for prowling round, and tries the lids sometimes to see if they'll open. He hates snotties like poison. Week before last he found an old pair of coaling-boots of mine stowed away in a corner and gave me the choice of a week's leave stopped or half a dozen from the sub. You can bet your sweet young life which I took."

"But didn't it hurt?" Michael asked.

The snotty grinned. "I suppose it did a bit," he admitted. "But Lord knows I'm used to it. Beatings don't worry me like they used to. I'm getting a stern like a hippopotamus. But take your greatcoat and dirk off and shove on a monkey jacket and I'll take you along to the gunroom."

"Keep all your washing gear in your chest," Pulwell, the midshipman, advised. "If you don't the senior snotties will bag everything. They're frightful sharks, especially Somers."

He pointed out the cabins occupied by the assistant paymaster and assistant engineers, also the apartment occupied by the potentate of the gunroom, the sub-lieutenant himself. Finally, as Michael was ready, he led him across to a curtained doorway on the port side of the flat, from behind which came a confused babel of voices mingled with shouts of derisive merriment.

"Here we are," said Pulwell, drawing aside the curtain. "This is the gunroom."

[1] "Number One," i.e. the First-Lieutenant—responsible for the cleanliness of the ship below the upper deck.

Digitized by Google

It was an apartment about twenty feet long by fifteen wide along the side of the ship, with a row of scuttles some six feet above the waterline. There were two long tables—one fore-and-aft and the other running athwartships along the after bulkhead, seating accommodation being provided by padded forms with swing backs and rows of cushioned lockers along the ship's side and after bulkhead. The tables were covered with the usual Service pattern red and black tablecloths, each with an anæmic-looking fern in a battered copper pot by way of decoration. Tea, handed out in large china cups from the pantry serving-hatch over the sideboard along the foremost bulkhead was in progress, and a couple of pale-faced, harassed-looking "domestics" flitted to and fro with plates of cake, buttered toast, biscuits, bread and butter or jam, ministering to the wants of about twenty officers, mostly midshipmen, seated round the tables.

It was noticeable that the sub-lieutenant, the assistant paymaster, assistant engineers, and the older-looking midshipmen all sat at the fore-and-aft table near the pantry, while the junior snotties, the clerk, and assistant clerk occupied the other.

The heated, rubicund face of Mr. Slatters, the messman, who catered for the denizens of the gunroom for the sum of one shilling per officer per day in addition to what they received as their Service rations, was framed in the square serving-hatch.

The conversation was strident. Everybody shouted at once.

"A cup of tea, a slice of cake, and a plate of mixed biscuits," came a plaintive voice. "And for the Lord's sake smack it about! I've been waiting ten minutes and have got to go away in my boat at four o'clock!"

"My pot of strawberry jam and a plate of bread and butter!"

"Slatters, you old rogue!" roared a voice. "You've been watering the milk again!"

Digitized by Google

"Who the blazes has been eating my potted meat?"

"Ow, you blighter, let go. That's my tin of biscuits you're wolfing, you greedy hound!"

"Can't you get anything better than these beastly rock-cakes, Slatters? This one's got tooth-marks where someone tried to bite it a week ago!"

"Where's my apple jelly? This is black currant you've given me—— Oh, all right. It's got Harley's name on it. I'll help myself, he's away in his boat."

There was a babel of many tongues.

The sub, a heavily built, truculent-looking youth with an unshaven blue chin seated with his cap on at the head of the table eating buttered toast, looked up.

"Ye gods!" he exclaimed, holding up his hands in mock amazement. "Yet another dog's body. Look what we've caught this time! Is this a battleship or a home for foundlings?"

The uproar ceased for a moment, and Michael instantly became an object of interest for twenty pairs of observant eyes.

"What's your name, wart?" the sub demanded.

"Bray, sir."

"Don't 'sir' me, curse you!" growled the sub-lieutenant. "My name's Lendon. Understand?"

"Yes, Lendon," said Michael nervously.

"Well, don't stand there gaping like an early Christian martyr. Don't you want tea?"

"Yes, please," said Michael.

"Well go and sit over there and ask for what you want," Lendon commanded, waving his hand towards the junior table. "Hang it, you don't expect me to kiss you and feed you with a spoon, do you?"

The sub, having taken no exercise for several days, and having just risen from his afternoon slumber after keeping the middle watch the night before, was peevish and irritable. He was a very good fellow really, but was always severe to new arrivals. He did it for a purpose—

Digitized by Google

to instil terror into their hearts, for once terrified they were far more easily subjugated if inclined to be obstreperous.

The junior snotties tittered nervously. It was always sound policy to laugh at Lendon's jokes.

"Crichton! Travers!" the autocrat snapped, noticing two "crabs" sparring at the farther table. "If I see any more of that scrapping I'll bend you both over the table and give you each a good dozen!"

Thus was Michael Bray introduced to his future home and future mess-mates. He felt rather unhappy about it, far unhappier than when he had joined the "Britannia."

Michael Bray *Chapter X*

It did not take Michael very long to fall into the manners and customs of the gunroom. The sub, though strict, occasionally unmerciful, was not a bad fellow in his way in the eyes of his juniors; but woe betide any young officer who offended or thwarted him.

Illicit smoking and drinking were Lendon's hobbies, and he had an uncanny knack of seeking out offenders in either respect. Sometimes he even caused junior midshipmen to be searched for forbidden cigarette cases on their return from an afternoon ashore, and made them blow heavily upon him for the detection of the odour of tobacco in their breath. Even the liberal consumption of scented cachous or peppermints was of no avail, for, as Lendon observed, neither sweetmeat was a common article of diet among "crabs," and the scent of either was taken as tantamount to an admission of crime for which the offender suffered in the usual way.

And Michael, though he neither drank nor smoked when he first joined, did not escape chastisement.

Digitized by Google

" Bray," said Lendon, the ninth evening after Michael's arrival on board, " was it your sea-boats I saw sculling about in the flat this morning ? "

" Oh, no, Lendon ! " Michael answered, vehemently shaking his head.

" Was it your towel lying about in the bathroom, then ? "

Again the answer was a decided negative.

" Anyhow, you've not been beaten yet," said the chief inquisitor, ruthlessly changing his tactics.

" Oh, no, Lendon ! " from Michael, with an air of great innocence.

" Very well. I'll just give you half a dozen to go on with ! " observed the autocrat, with a smile, taking down his cane. " You must have done something I haven't bowled out. Just smell that spot on the table-cloth. Tauter, you young devil ! Get over tauter ! "

Michael was perfectly innocent of any misdemeanour whatsoever, but knew better than to argue or object. He disposed his small person as commanded, and the resulting process, though the sub merely played with him, hurt quite a lot.

The gunroom officers were divided into three coteries : the sub, assistant engineers, and assistant paymaster—who had attained commissioned rank and wore gold stripes—forming the first ; and the senior snotties the second. Lastly came the minor midshipmen and the assistant clerk, variously known as the " crabs," " warts," or " dog's bodies."

These inferior beings did not count at all. Their voice was unheard in the counsels and general management of the mess. Certainly there was a suggestion, or " growl," book in which they might enter their ideas upon mess matters or complaints as to the quality of the food. But the use of the " growl " book by a crab savoured of a crime, for not only would the matter be treated as frivolous because it had been indicted by a crab, but the author would be duly bent over the table

Digitized by Google

and executed by the sub or a senior snotty for presumption in daring to hold any opinion at all.

There were eight senior snotties, all over eighteen. Six of them were on the verge of going up for their examinations in seamanship, having passed which they would don the single gold stripes of acting sub-lieutenants and spend a hectic farewell evening on board in riotous enjoyment preparatory to joining the Royal Naval College at Greenwich for courses in navigation and pilotage previous to further exams. Once at Greenwich they would be treated much like glorified schoolboys and subjected to almost as severe a discipline as the contemptible crabs themselves. But they had all been at sea for three years or more, and in the "Hamilcar's" gunroom, where personal prestige went largely by length of service, they were great and important personages indeed, whose word was law. A lifted finger or a whispered command summoned a cohort of crabs to do their magnificent bidding, and any one of them could inflict condign punishment for the smallest offence, fancied or otherwise.

Several prided themselves on chewing tobacco and the ability to "spit brown" with deadly and seamanlike precision. Their collective experiences in the Pacific, the Mediterranean, China, and Australia would have filled a book, and their conversation was liberally interlarded with the most lurid of nautical language through mere force of habit. A couple, objects of veneration to the newly joined, even wore on their jackets stripes of yellow and black ribbon, thus indicating that they had been on active service in the expedition to the bloodstained city of Benin in 1897. Medals for war service were comparatively rare adornments in the navy in those days. A proportion of the more senior officers possessed the British medal and Khedive's bronze star for the Egyptian campaigns of 1882–1889; but the commander of the "Hamilcar" himself, who had been many years in the Service and was regarded by the gun-

Digitized by Google

room as an ancient and crotchety old shellback with one foot in the grave, wore no decoration except Queen Victoria's Jubilee medal of 1897.

The senior snotty, a husky fellow of nearly nineteen with a prematurely blue chin, was possessed of an insatiable thirst for marsala and beer, which occasionally he mixed. Perennially insolvent, he owned little in the way of clothes beyond what he stood up in. He had served three years in a cruiser in China, and rather prided himself on the trail of debts left behind him at nearly every port on that extensive station, where almost anything could be obtained by the simple expedient of signing a "chit," or IOU. But Chinese and Japanese washerwomen did not recognize anything but hard cash. They knew by bitter experience the cheerfully irresponsible habits of impecunious midshipmen of Her Majesty's Navy, and required coin of the realm before delivering up the clean washing. Cash was the one thing that Mannering invariably lacked. In default of payment he had been compelled to leave most of his shirts and undergarments in China as well, while a dour and unforgiving father had refused absolutely to honour any further bills incurred with his son's outfitter in England.

Even Mannering's sextant and telescope had been pawned to raise money and had never been redeemed. His wardrobe was scanty in the extreme; but he throve nevertheless, and became larger and hungrier every day. He was the proud originator of what he called "The Senior Snotty's Endowment Fund," by which delightful institution the crabs, who called it downright robbery, were permitted as a great honour to provide under compulsion articles of habiliment and adornment for Mannering's august person. The articles, though ostensibly borrowed, were seldom returned. The contents of the senior snotty's chest, such as they were, were marked with every sort of a name but his own.

But the S.S.E.F. went still further than this. By

Digitized by Google

its constutution any wart who was temporarily affluent could be cajoled, likewise as a great honour, to go ashore with Mannering and to pay for his refreshment and entertainment as part exchange for the pleasure of his company. He was not the sort of fellow who cared to do things by halves either. He liked eggs with his tea, beer whenever it occurred to him, and never walked unless compelled. Moreover, when he fell in love with a fluffy, golden-haired goddess who presided in a tobacco kiosk on the pier at Weymouth, it was a crab who provided the wherewithal to purchase a *gage d'amour* in the shape of a nine carat gold bangle.

Mannering's most renowned exploit, however, occurred at Chatham, the " Hamilcar's " home port, which she periodically visited for refits and to give leave.

Going ashore late one afternoon with a junior midshipman who had received a five-pound note from his father for his birthday, Mannering first indulged in a quantity of malt liquor at that young gentleman's expense. The pair next proceeded to a grill-room, where, again at the junior officer's expense, they had their evening meal. Fish was what they ordered, and observing a fried plaice left over on the dish, Mannering, somewhat mellowed by his potations and saying that it was a pity that good food should be wasted, wrapped the fish in the evening paper and placed it in his pocket, where he promptly forgot all about it.

Supper over, the roisterers repaired to the local music-hall, where, not at Mannering's expense, they were soon seated in the stage box. The entertainment was not conspicuous for its talent, and the senior snotty spent the first half in blissful slumber. Waking during the interval he demanded more beer, after partaking of which he declared himself ready to join battle with man or beast.

It was a fat lady of many summers, clad mostly in tights, with an expansive smile and peroxided hair in plaits, who aroused Mannering's ire. She did her best, poor

Digitized by Google

soul, mincing about the stage singing about her mother's " graive " and the flowers she intended to place upon it. Mannering searching for a satisfactory missile, placed his hand in his pocket. The plaice! Happy thought!

His face was wreathed in a grin as he withdrew the greasy fish from its wrapping and carefully balanced it on the flat of his hand, keeping it carefully out of sight. Then, when the artist came towards him and turned to pirouette across the stage, he hurled the thing full at her offending back. To miss was impossible. It caught her full between the shoulder-blades and burst like a shrapnel shell.

The song ceased abruptly. The orchestra stopped in a wild discord, and for a moment there was dead silence. Then the place was suddenly in an uproar. Some of the audience laughed and cheered, some booed, while the singer, palpitating like a blancmange, pointed an accusing finger at the stage box.

" It's them cads 'oo did it! " she screeched in fury. " It's a shime throwin' things at an honest woman 'oo's tryin' to earn 'er children's food! It's a shime, the dirty tikes! Why can't I 'ave fair play the same as anyone else? "

Why, indeed?

Uniformed attendants, bursting with zeal and importance, appeared in the stage box and placed themselves in pugilistic attitudes. They were used to such goings on, for the " chuckers out " were often in demand in a place of entertainment where the performers' efforts were not infrequently saluted with showers of fruit and vegetables.

" Come on," they exclaimed truculently, unbuttoning their coats. " Clear out o' this, or we'll blinkin' well 'eave you out! "

" I beg your pardon," said Mannering with a drawl. " Are you addressing me? "

" Yus! You and your friend. You've 'bin 'eavin things at the hartists! "

Digitized by Google

" My dear good sir," Mannering expostulated, " I hate to—er—give the show away, but my friend here was entirely responsible. I'm afraid his indignation must have got the better of him."

He indicated the junior snotty, who presently found himself conducted hastily and ungently through the emergency exit and deposited in the street. There were no further complications; but it was the junior midshipman's first visit to a music-hall and a long time before he heard the last of it. No wonder his mother had told him that they were places of evil repute to be shunned like the plague.

And Mannering did not even have the grace to apologize. He regarded the episode as a merry jest.

As a general rule, however, there was a great gulf fixed between the gunroom commissioned officers and senior snotties on the one hand and the junior midshipmen on the other. The crabs since they were the servants of all and masters of none, formed a class apart, and were made to feel that their juniority and inexperience amounted almost to a crime. Sometimes, when their seniors unbent a little, they were treated with amused toleration mingled with contempt, though more often than not their natural high spirits were repressed with ruthless severity.

Michael and his friend Johnnie Barker, the only representatives of their particular term on board, were the junior members of the mess. They were only naval cadets, and, with Danvers, the newly joined assistant clerk, were the lowliest of the low. Like Agag, it behoved them to walk delicately and with circumspection, for there were a hundred ways in which they might give offence, far more even than there had been in the early days in the " Britannia."

The third day Michael was on board, for instance, he was innocently walking up and down on the starboard side of the quarter-deck at about five o'clock in the afternoon, when the commander happened to come out of his cabin on his way to the wardroom.

Digitized by Google

"Mr. Bray!" he called.

"Sir," said Michael, running forward and saluting.

"Are you the young gentleman of the watch?" the commander asked. He invariably referred to the midshipman as the "young gentleman."

"No, sir."

"Well, just remember that unless you are on duty the starboard side of the quarter-deck is reserved for senior officers."

"Very good, sir," said Michael.

"And don't say 'very good,' boy," the commander went on, pretending to frown. "You aren't a shop assistant. Use the old service expression, 'Aye, aye, sir.'"

There were endless little ways in which a new-comer might break the unwritten laws, etiquette, and tradition of the Service—such things as whistling in the bathroom or gunroom flat; omitting to salute the quarter-deck whenever one came on to it from forward; using the starboard accommodation ladder instead of the port for coming alongside in a boat unless one happened to have a senior officer on board; getting into a boat after a senior officer, or getting out before him. It was to the everlasting credit of the other junior midshipmen, however, that they forgot they had been nabobs in the third and fourth terms in the "Britannia" when Michael and Johnnie were news. They were always ready to help and to advise to the best of their ability, and having been through the mill themselves their good-natured assistance was a real blessing, for there was much to be picked up.

Michael, after undergoing a cursory examination in navigation, pilotage, seamanship, torpedo, and his knowledge of "the great gun," shipped the white patches of a midshipman in April, three months after joining the "Hamilcar." And remarkably proud he felt at the metamorphosis, albeit it made no difference whatsoever to his work or status in the ship. He was still

Digitized by Google

a wart, and a very junior one at that, and on his advancement had to conform to the time-honoured custom of standing drinks to the entire gunroom—a most expensive business which nearly finished off his ten shillings' worth of wine bill for the month—and of being compelled to kneel before Lendon after dinner, and to have a ship's biscuit broken over his head with some violence to show that he was well and truly a snotty. Afterwards they made him eat the pieces.

But he was able to write and tell Diana all about it, and to inform her with some gusto that he had been "promoted," though, rather to his disgust, his advancement was not deigned worthy of notice by the newspapers. And Diana, in the most unblushing way, wrote him a very pretty letter of congratulation, beginning "My own darling old Michael," which Michael treasured in the inside breast pocket of his everyday monkey jacket until it was all frayed at the edges.

At the same time his daily pay increased from one shilling to the munificent sum of one and ninepence, which, with the allowance of fifty pounds a year, which had to be guaranteed by his father, constituted his entire income.

Want of cash, however, did not seriously trouble anyone, even if one lacked the wherewithal to pay for repairs to one's boots. One threw them away, or sold them if anyone was mug enough to buy, and ordered a new pair from one's outfitter. Moreover, it was generally possible to borrow five shillings from the messman, and a walk ashore, even if one went hungry, cost nothing. As often as not Michael landed without a single penny in his pocket.

In some ways this condition of perpetual penury was a good thing, since it taught them to husband every penny. In other directions, however, it was a curse; for it encouraged midshipmen to run into heavy debt with their outfitters for articles not strictly necessary, which the latter were only too ready and pleased to supply in the

Digitized by Google

sure knowledge that the parents would eventually foot the bill.

Michael Bray — *Chapter XI*

MICHAEL, as was customary, served a year in the Channel Squadron before being appointed to a ship on a foreign station. During this period he gained little in stature, and was still absurdly small for his age and shrill about the voice. Nevertheless, his character developed, and he gained enormously in initiative, self-confidence and resource.

Boat work was regarded as one of the most important portions of a midshipman's training, since it put him by himself in a position of responsibility in charge of men, and taught him how to act in any emergency that might arise. And except for a month, when he served as the captain's A.D.C., more or less a sinecure appointment, where one stood behind the great man on the bridge when the ship was entering or leaving harbour, or during evolutions, and ran any errands that he desired, Michael was constantly away in boats.

He started off in a very humble way in charge of the second whaler, an ancient craft with a crew of five men and a coxswain, used for such odd jobs as landing the postman and stewards, or going to the flagship for correspondence.

None the less she was something to be proud of and to take an interest in, and so jealous was Michael of her appearance that he even went to the expense of providing white duck covers piped with blue for the cushions in the stern sheets, and a long white strip of duck edged with blue to cover the masts and sails when they were not in use and were laid fore-and-aft along the thwarts. There was also a pair of wonderful white yoke lines for steering, and a brass yoke with two dolphins head to head

Digitized by Google

which shipped on to the rudder head. Most of these embellishments were provided and maintained out of his own pocket, and he could ill afford them. Nevertheless, in his eyes the result was well worth it.

Even the commander, who was none too lavish with his praise, noticed her appearance. "Young man," he said, with a twinkle in those grey eyes of his, "your whaler's a credit to the ship. But don't spend too much money on her. She's an old boat, and presently you'll get one of the cutters."

But for nearly three months Michael was away in his whaler in all weathers whenever she was lowered as duty boat. Unless it was flat calm they were always under sail, and however much he loved her he was soon forced to the conclusion that she was sometimes possessed of a devil.

With no keel to speak of wherewith to grip the water and hold her up into the wind, she sidled to leeward like a crab, and with her two stumpy little masts and pair of lugsails with long yards which had to be dipped round the masts and generally became unmanageable every time she tacked, she was difficult to handle even in the gentlest breeze. In squally weather, with a reef down, the spray came dashing over the weather gunwale and the water slopped in over the lee side as she leant over in the gusts, while the crew, with their boots off, sat well up to windward to keep her as upright as possible. It was ticklish and responsible work for a man, let alone a small and inexperienced boy of fifteen who, if he had not been in the navy, would still have been at school.

And Michael was a little nervous at first, for there was always the risk of something carrying away, or perhaps a capsize, when someone might be drowned through his fault. Such things had been known to happen, and in bad weather his heart was in his mouth at least twenty times a day.

And in finer weather, too, though the element of danger was non-existent, it was still exciting enough,

Digitized by Google

for the old boat, as though laughing at Michael's want of knowledge, sometimes became as perverse and refractory as any mule. For perhaps an hour she might behave like a perfect lady. Then, when asked to go about from one tack to the other, she would fling her bows into the wind, and, remaining obstinately "in irons," would refuse to pay off one way or the other and drift ignominiously stern first down the harbour in full view of the flagship's crowded quarter-deck, while Michael, breathless and vituperant, frantically worked the long tiller to get her sailing again, and the boat's crew muttered profanely under their breaths. It was Michael's own fault in all probability; but exasperating nevertheless. However much she was coaxed, however carefully she was sailed, she always seemed to choose the most conspicuous possible place wherein to hold him up to ridicule.

The commander, too, had a habit of parading the quarter-deck with his telescope under his arm and kept a zealous eye upon all his boats while they were away under sail. Often and often, when Michael bumped the gangway rather harder than necessary in coming alongside, or missed stays, or otherwise made an exhibition of himself, he thought he was in for a bad wigging. But somehow the wigging never came. The commander knew even better than Michael that the whaler was a difficult boat to sail, and had merely put him there to test him and to give him self-confidence in the light of experience. Indeed, he would not have taken it seriously to heart if the boat had been broken into little pieces. Not one, but many, snotties had tried their 'prentice hands upon her, crashing her bows unmercifully into unyielding gangways or solid ships' sides, splintering masts, springing booms, smashing rudders, and all the rest of it.

Jackson, the bearded second class petty officer coxswain, who had never been known to wear boots except under compulsion and was never without a quid of

Digitized by Google

tobacco bulging out his cheek and a strand of ancient spunyarn round his right big toe, was also a great help.

He seemed to forestall every order, and to realize instinctively when Michael was perplexed and undecided as to what to do next. Moreover, though always respectful in his manner and mindful of the fact that Michael was in charge and responsible, he was not above whispering a word or two of advice if he saw it was needed. And Michael welcomed it, for Jackson had been at sea when he was a baby in long clothes.

"Ease yer foresheet a shade, sir," he would suggest hoarsely in Michael's ear. "Luff, sir. Luff a bit. Now, sir, run her off a little to get way on and then try goin' about and we'll just fetch the gangway nicely. Don't go forgettin' what I told yer 'bout lettin' fly the foresheet and bearin' the fores'l out to wind'ard when she comes head to wind."

And Michael, because he loved it, improved in his boat sailing, so much so that by the time he became a full-blown snotty he was in charge of the third cutter, a twelve-oared boat much heavier and larger than the whaler, though far easier and sweeter to handle under sail.

There was something fiercely exhilarating in tearing through the water with the lee gunwale nearly awash and a spanking breeze bellying out the sails in hard curves. He loved the sharp, slapping sound of the little seas on the weather bow as the boat drove through them, loved the clean salt tang of the windswept spray on his face. But the finest sensation of all was to feel the boat obeying his slightest pressure on the tiller, and to imagine that she was a living, sentient thing, as indeed she was. More than once he was temporarily in charge of one of the picquet-boats, which were usually run by the senior snotties only. They, being steamboats, were steered with a wheel and could go in any direction independent of the wind. But being in charge of them was nothing like so fine as having a boat under

Digitized by Google

sail, where one was for ever contriving and pitting one's skill and knowledge against those immutable forces of nature, the wind and the sea.

One of the proudest days in Michael's life was when his Uncle James and Diana, who had come down to Weymouth for a week, came off in his cutter by special permission for tea on board and to see over the ship. There was a fine slashing breeze and rather a popple on the water, and Uncle James, who was no sailor, soon became as limp and as pale as any pocket-handkerchief and relapsed into a state of inconsolable disinterestedness. But Diana loved it. With her hair flying from under her little fur hat, her cheeks reddened by the wind, and eyes dancing with excitement, she gazed admiringly at Michael as he grasped the tiller with his cap a little on one side and the shining dirk swinging at his hip. He showed off a little, as was only natural, and Diana was hugely impressed with his importance and prowess, albeit a little awed at the silent admiration of thirteen brawny, barefooted seamen, who sat like graven images feasting their eyes on her prettiness.

"You do it beautifully, Michael," she whispered in his ear. "Is it awfully difficult?"

"Ssh! Not so loud!" he whispered, fearful that the coxswain might overhear. "It's as easy as anything. Like to have a shot?"

Diana nodded, and, standing up in the stern-sheets with her slim young body braced against the tiller, endeavoured to sail the boat. Michael, while retaining his hold in case of accidents, allowed her to move it as she wished; but she found it more difficult than she thought, and soon gave it up.

"It's awfully exciting, but seems jolly hard," she said, sitting down again rather breathlessly. "It tugs at one's arm so, and I'm sure I don't know how you keep the boat straight. She seems to wiggle all over the place."

Michael laughed. "That only comes with practice," he observed, in rather a superior manner. "If you'd

Digitized by Google

been at it as long as I have you'd be all right. But of course it's not blowing really hard to-day," he added, as a heavy whiff of spray came flying aft from the weather bow to give the lie to his words. "You should see what it's like when there's half a gale of wind and a heavy sea."

He brought the cutter alongside in fine style, the boat flying into the wind, the foresail coming down and foremast after it, and the mainsail being topped up, exactly at the right moment, so that she stopped dead alongside the accommodation ladder with scarcely a tremor.

It was the first time Diana had ever been on board a man-of-war, and Michael never forgot the glow of pride with which he took her and Uncle James round the ship, showing them everything from the gunroom to the gun turrets and six-inch gun casemates, the mess-decks, his sea-chest, and the place where he slung his hammock. They even climbed on to the fore bridge and explored the submerged torpedo flat and ammunition passages. It was an unforgettable day.

They had tea in the commander's cabin, which Michael, in some trepidation, had asked permission to use as he knew the commander was spending the afternoon ashore. Johnnie Barker assisted in doing the honours.

"I call it all ripping!" Diana exclaimed enthusiastically, sitting down to hot buttered toast after examining the photographs of the commander's wife and children over his writing-table and poking her nose into his sleeping-cabin and bathroom. "I wish you'd hurry up and get promoted, Mike. It must be spiffing to be a commander on a ship like this and to live in such a cosy room. I could make you some awfully jolly curtains and things."

Michael groaned inwardly. "Don't talk about 'on' a ship, Diana!" he objected. "It's 'in' a ship or 'on board' a ship—I've told you heaps of times. And we talk about 'cabins,' not 'rooms.'"

Even Uncle James, reviving under the influence of tea, seemed rather impressed with the ship, while Johnnie

Digitized by Google

Barker, try as he would, could not keep his eyes off Diana.

"That sister of yours is a jolly pretty girl," he confided to Michael some days later. "A jolly good sort, too. I should like to get to know her, I think.

"But she isn't my sister," Michael told him. "She's my cousin, and is by way of being—er—well a great pal of mine."

"Oh, blast!" said Johnnie ruefully.

Michael made many friends in the "Hamilcar." There was Mr. Creevy, the hoary-headed old gunner of the ship, a warrant officer, who had his cabin in the flat abaft the gunroom. Having come into the service through the hawse pipe,[1] he was a regular old sea-dog, full of the most wondrous and blood-curdling stories of the old navy, to which Michael and Johnnie Barker who were honorary members of his cabin, used to sit and listen by the hour smoking surreptitious cigarettes.

Mr. Creevy, who, as gunner, was responsible for salutes, never condescended to use a stop-watch for timing purposes. Instead, he employed the ancient habit of repeating to himself a line of time-honoured ritual between giving orders for each gun to be fired.

"Fire ONE!

"If I wasn't a gunner I wouldn't be here.

"Fire TWO!

"Fifteen years a gunner and called a blurry old fool.

"Fire THREE!"

and so on, with a different remark between each successive discharge to the maximum number of twenty-one.

Michael and Johnnie often used to get him to go through the ritual for their benefit, for some of the interpolations were more entertaining than strictly parliamentary.

The gunner was also wont to declare that "in the good old days, young gennel'men, before the navy went to the dawgs," he had seen many men seized up and flogged with a cat-o'-nine-tails for the most trifling offences,

[1] I.e. as a seaman on the lower deck.

Digitized by Google

and that he had once even witnessed the execution of a malefactor by hanging at the yard-arm. Michael wondered, however, why Mr. Creevy did not also say that he had seen men keelhauled, for his hanging story was untrue. Mr. Creevy, on his own showing, had not joined the navy as a boy until early in the seventies. The last man hanged on board one of H.M. ships, Michael afterwards discovered, was in the gunboat "Leven" in China in 1860.[1]

But though rather given to drawing the long bow the gunner was an excellent man. He did not even get very angry when Michael's tortoise, purchased at Gibraltar for Diana, took it into its head to escape from its perforated cardboard box and to die in a most inaccessible corner behind Mr. Creevy's bunk. Michael, expecting trouble, naturally said nothing about his pet's disappearance; but some days later, thinking a rat had died, the entire cabin was torn to bits by the carpenter

[1] I am indebted to the late Commander Yelverton O'Keeffe, R.N. (retired), for the following details of this unhappy occurrence, which have a certain historical interest.

On July 9, 1860, the gun-vessel "Leven" was anchored close to H.M.S. "Actaeon" in Hulu Shan Bay, about sixty miles north of Port Arthur. Lieutenant Arthur, the officer after whom Port Arthur was named, was in command of the "Leven." As he was sitting at breakfast with the second master a pistol shot was fired at him through the skylight by his servant, a marine, who was in trouble owing to some irregularity in connexion with the commanding officer's wine. The following extracts are from a contemporary journal kept by an officer:

July 9th, 8.30 a.m. Lieutenant-Commander dangerously wounded and second master wounded by pistol shots fired by a marine. Sent to "Actaeon" for assistance. 10.45 a.m. Weighed and proceeded under steam. 7.0 p.m. Rounded Liau-ti-shan.

July 10th, 2.15 a.m. Anchored in Ta-lien-wan (Dalny).

July 12th, 8.0 a.m. Sent ship's company to attend a court martial. 2.30 p.m. Court martial concluded. Prisoner condemned to death.

July 13th, 1.0 p.m. Boats of all ships assembled round to witness execution. Bowmen of each came on board to man the ship. 1.30 p.m. Prisoner executed by hanging by the neck from the fore yard-arm starboard side. 2.0 p.m. Lowered the body. Enclosed same in two hammocks.

July 14th, 4.30 a.m. Weighed and proceeded out of Ta-lien-wan. 6.40 a.m. Committed the remains of the late —— to the deep. Cape Rock bearing S.E. 1½ miles. Expended hammocks two in number, round shot ten in number.

Digitized by Google

and his mates before they discovered the source of the peculiar odour.

"You young limb, you!" Mr. Creevy exclaimed. "You deserves a rope's endin', that you do! You and that tortoise of yours! Didn't I tell you 'e wouldn't live more'n a week if you fed 'im on rice pudden, didn't I now? And now look what the pair of you have done—the 'ole of my cabin's like a ru-ine!" The poor old man was nearly in tears.

There was also the busy Mr. Sennet, the boatswain, who, when he had the time to spare, would patiently teach Michael knotting and splicing on deck during the dog-watches. He was a burly, fierce-looking little man with heavy iron-grey whiskers, a voice like a bull elephant, and a hairy fist with fingers like sausages. Among the snotties Mr. Sennet was reputed to have the most hairy chest in the Service.

"Call that a long splice?" he would say, clicking his teeth and shaking his head when Michael presented his handiwork for inspection. "Tut tut! Reminds me of me old aunt's clothes line. Look here now, Mr. Bray, this is how we does it." The enormous fingers would get to work, tautening out a strand here, tucking in an end there, and in a minute the thing was done.

When Captain Barton was relieved by a successor, certificates were granted to all officers, in accordance with the usual practice. The wording of the boatswain's certificate, however, had somehow got mixed up with that intended for one of the midshipmen, so that Mr. Sennet was described as having conducted himself "with sobriety. A somewhat idle young officer, but has lately shown signs of improvement!"

"Look at this, sir!" he exclaimed, almost weeping, showing the offending thing to the commander. "Nineteen years a boatswain with a blameless record and called an idle young officer! Me, sir, who never leaves the ship 'cept at Chatham!"

Now Mr. Sennet was an excellent officer and the com-

Digitized by Google

mander's right-hand man on deck, so there was obviously some mistake. But it was not until the matter was rectified and the boatswain received his proper description as " a most capable, energetic, and zealous officer " that he was really happy again.

The wording on Michael's certificate, incidentally, was somewhat encouraging. He was stated to have conducted himself during Captain Barton's tenure of command " with sobriety. Has kept a log. Instruments in good order. Mr. Bray is a smart and promising young officer who has the makings of a good seaman."

By regulation, the somewhat insulting " with sobriety " had still to be inserted upon the certificate of all officers " deserving of it," as though drunkenness were the rule rather than the exception. Remarks as to the log and condition of the instruments had also to appear upon the " flimsies " (certificates) of all midshipmen.

Michael's ideas were widened through meeting many people. Moreover, he saw something of the world, for though the fleet spent most of its time in home waters visiting such places as Portland, Torquay, Berehaven, Blacksod Bay, Killary Bay, and Lough Foyle, there was a foreign cruise in the spring. Then it was that they went to the Spanish ports of Arosa Bay and Vigo, and to Lisbon, Gibraltar, and Aranci Bay in Sardinia. The older midshipmen, who had served their regular commissions of foreign stations, professed to be bored at what they considered the very ordinary itinerary. Supremely blasé, they talked a great deal of places in China, the West Indies, and the Pacific, and pretended to regard such nearby spots as Lisbon and Gibraltar with contempt.

" Lisbon and Gib ! " said one of them, snorting with derision when Michael expressed his joy at the chance of seeing these places. " Good Lord, Bray ! Rotten holes ! Everybody's been there. As full of trippers as Blackpool or Margate ! You wait till you've been to sea as long as I have."

Digitized by Google

But to Michael, who had never been abroad in his life, it was all intensely novel and interesting. It was wonderful to be out of England at all; and he built up a wealth of romance for himself round historic places he had read of ever since he could remember and had heard about afresh during the naval history lessons in the "Britannia." Cape Finisterre and Cape St. Vincent, Cape Trafalgar and the Straits of Gibraltar, with the huge hump of the Rock on the one side and the dim blue mountains of Africa on the other—the "pillars of Hercules" of the ancients; the gateway of the Mediterranean.

Towards the close of the year, in October, came the outbreak of the Boer War. Almost immediately two of the Channel Squadron cruisers sailed under sealed orders. It was popularly supposed that they were going straight to reinforce the squadron at the seat of war, and there was wild jealousy and much cheering when they sailed for Blacksod Bay in the dusk of an autumn evening.

"Lucky devils!" said everybody. "They'll all be in khaki in a month."

As a matter of fact they did not get beyond St. Vincent, where their officers and men had the prosaic task of coaling transports full of troops on their way to the Cape.

Until Christmas, when they were at home giving the customary leave to officers and men, the battleships and remaining cruisers went to Gibraltar, where for a time they became quite warlike. Ammunition was even got up for some of the lighter guns, while extra sentries with ball cartridge were posted during the night. The wildest and most improbable rumours were in the air—one to the effect that the Boers had purchased a torpedo-boat with which they were about to make an attempt to destroy the British fleet. Excitement was intense, almost as pronounced as in the Fashoda crisis during Michael's last term in the "Britannia," when a yarn

Digitized by Google

flew round the ship to the effect that the Admiralty had ordered all officers to sharpen their swords!

And how Michael's heart thrilled when he heard of the Naval Brigades from the ships at the Cape fighting ashore in South Africa. He never quite forgot the awed whispers with which they discussed the news of the gallant charge of the seamen and marines on the Boer position at the summit of the boulder-strewn kopje at Graspan. Heavy casualties were incurred before the enemy were driven out at the point of the bayonet, and, among other officers, a midshipman of the "Doris" was killed. It brought home to Michael what war really meant—that it spared neither young nor old.

Even snotties were not immune, though it was almost impossible to realize that one of them had actually died on the field of battle. Somehow it seemed a little unfair; but there was no single midshipman in the "Hamilcar's" gunroom—indeed, in the entire fleet—who did not take it as a personal matter and would joyfully have bartered everything he possessed for the opportunity of avenging that death.

Within ten months, before he was even seventeen, Michael himself was destined to be in action.

Michael Bray — *Chapter XII*

"DIANA!" Michael shouted breathlessly, hammering impatiently on the door of that young lady's bedroom, "are you up?"

It was early in January. Michael was on leave, and coming down to breakfast had found an official envelope addressed to himself on the hall table. It was not altogether unexpected; but the news it contained was sufficiently important to justify his unceremonious demonstration.

The door opened to reveal Diana in a most unbecoming

Digitized by Google

grey flannel dressing-gown of Miss Jenkins's choice with her hair loose and cascading over her shoulders. It reached well below her waist.

"You'll get into a fine old row if Jenks catches you," she said, her head on one side and busy with her hair-brush. "There'll be a frightful rumpus if she knows you've seen me in my dressing-gown. Most unlady-like she'll call it."

"Confound Jenks!" said Michael under his breath. "What the deuce does it matter? I simply had to rush upstairs to tell you the news. I'm appointed to the 'Boreas.' I say, Diana," he added awkwardly, standing back a little the better to admire her, "you do look topping with your hair all over the place like that!"

"Silly boy!" she smiled, rather pleased. "But your language isn't topping, Mike," she added severely. "What's the 'Boreas'?" The brush stopped and she jerked the hair free of her face.

"A first-class cruiser. She's at Portsmouth. She commissions for China at the end of the month. I'm jolly lucky to go to her, by Jove! I've always been keen—— Why, what's the matter?" he asked, seeing the look of unhappiness in her eyes. "What's up, Diana? You don't mind, do you?"

"Mind?" she said slowly. "Of course I mind—horribly. I shan't see you for ages and ages!"

"But you knew jolly well I should have to go abroad when I'd done my year in the Channel," said Michael, rather surprised. "And now I get the very thing I want and have been talking about for ages you kick up a song about it."

"Knowing beforehand doesn't make things any better now," she answered with a catch in her voice. "I've been dreading it all along. I don't want you to go anywhere where I can't see you sometimes. Don't you—— Oh!"—she broke off fiercely—"I could shake you sometimes, Mike! You're so dense! Don't you realize

Digitized by Google

I'm fond of you? Can't you understand?" She was perilously close to tears.

"But Diana," Michael started weakly to expostulate, "I——"

Further explanation was useless, for the door was shut quite firmly in his face and he heard her move away.

Michael, rather annoyed with himself, went slowly downstairs. He was a little upset. Diana's attitude rather damped his joy, and evidently he had said something to displease her, though for the life of him he could not remember what. It was unlike her to flare up for no real reason at all; but girls were inscrutable things and most mysterious in their way. One never knew how to take them, or what was really at the back of their minds.

Michael was very young—virtually still a child. He was anything but indifferent to Diana. Indeed, he was extremely fond of her in his own peculiar, unsentimental way, and knew he could be jealous if she went about much with anybody but himself; but the jealousy would have been the same if she had an intimate girl friend. He liked to be with her, and to feel that she took an interest in him and his doings and he in hers. But beyond that—nothing. There were so many other attractive things in the world to think about that he could never be actively miserable without her. Any absorbing interest in girls had not yet taken possession of him. In many ways they were rather a nuisance.

But Diana for her part, though a few months younger than Michael, was in some ways almost a grown-up woman. Most of the girls she knew were at school, so that she had little really in common with them, and not one whom she could call a really intimate companion. Naturally warm-hearted and demonstrative, there was nobody of her own age except Michael upon whom she could lavish her affection, and deep down in her being she treasured a very tender feeling for him. She loved her father, and her mother when she was

Digitized by Google

alive; but this was not the same thing as loving Michael. He filled a gap in her life and to her was something of a hero. She longed to be able to mother him and to care for him, and to have him for her very own, and for always —to know, also, that she was essential to him. She was an only child; but Michael, whom she had known since babyhood, seemed more to her than a brother or sister could ever have been.

If Miss Jenkins had been aware of Diana's real tenderness for her cousin she would have characterized the attachment as stuff and nonsense. For one thing, Diana was much too young to be fervently fond of anyone. For another, Michael was a very ordinary boy, neither better nor worse than a good many others. Anyhow, he was none too particular about his personal appearance, and Miss Jenkins still had frequent reason to chide him about the high-water mark round his neck and the dirt in his finger-nails, reproof which incited Michael's frenzy.

But the meticulous Miss Jenkins—or so Diana always thought—was as cold as the tomb; a soured, unsympathetic creature incapable of any really deep feeling. Sentiment in any shape or form was entirely contrary to her nature. She even abhorred the use of diminutives or nicknames, and never seemed to understand that some people, particularly those without mothers like Diana, could do with occasional petting. Moreover, if Diana ever asked questions on matters about which it was quite natural that a girl should seek information, Miss Jenkins's invariable reply, uttered with a look of maidenly horror on her austere face, was, "I am surprised at your asking such questions, Diana! They are most unladylike. You will learn everything in good time."

The succeeding three weeks passed quickly. Michael had a great deal to see to and arrange: kit to be renewed, white uniform to be ordered and fitted, and a gun and ammunition—presents from his father—chosen and gloated over. He was in the highest spirits, wildly

Digitized by Google

happy at the prospect of going abroad and enthusiastic about the "Boreas," particularly because his friend and boon companion Johnnie Barker was going to her as well.

Michael was overjoyed at the prospect of having one friend among the crowd of new officers he would find on board; but, best of all, most of the other snotties were fresh from the "Britannia," so he would no longer be one of the dog's bodies in the gunroom. In a mild sort of way he might even be able to do a little bullying and ordering about if he could find any youth small and weak enough not to stick up for himself.

He was so happy, indeed, that he had no real inkling of the distress which Diana concealed in her heart. To her even the daily ritual of tearing off another leaf from the calendar in the schoolroom became a hateful penance.

"I wish I could put the horrid thing back a month," she said one morning, as Michael watched her remove the old leaf and furtively count the days left before his departure. "Another day gone! Only five left."

"I'm rather looking forward to getting away," Michael answered tactlessly, rather puzzled in his mind.

She looked at him for a moment without speaking, and her eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, Michael! Darling old Michael!" she said brokenly. "I do so hate your going away. I shall miss you horribly. . . . I don't think you really care a little bit." Her lips quivered ominously as she strove desperately to keep back the flood.

Michael was always upset at the sight of Diana crying. He never knew how to comfort her, and it made him feel supremely awkward.

"Care?" he answered. "Of course I care, Diana. Aren't you a jolly good pal of mine? Don't blub, old girl," he went on, trying to console her and putting his arm round her waist. "I'm awfully sorry to be leaving you—beastly sorry. You know I am, really. But it

Digitized by Google

is a bit difficult not to be rather bucked at going to China, isn't it ? "

Her arms went round his neck, her head went down, and in an instant she was sobbing unconstrainedly on his chest. Her whole body shook.

" There ! " he said, feeling an utter fool and patting her gently on the shoulder. " Don't blub, Diana."

For a moment or two she remained in his arms ; but then, quite suddenly, raised her head and kissed him hard upon the lips. Her warm tears wetted his cheek.

" Dear old Michael ! " she whispered between her sobs. " Oh ! " she exclaimed a second later, annoyed at her own weakness and pushing him away, " I'm a fool—a stupid fool ! I don't know why I should care so much ! If only I were a boy instead of a rotten girl, and then I could go out and do things like you."

She produced a grimy handkerchief and proceeded to dry her eyes and blow her nose with some vehemence.

" A boy," said Michael, eyeing her. " I'm jolly glad you aren't. Jolly glad ! "

Michael Bray — *Chapter XIII*

CAME ten minutes to nine on a bright January morning when Michael and Johnnie, replete with breakfast and wearing their round jackets and dirks, left their hotel, and, tipping the boots magnificently, embarked in an ancient " growler " piled with their luggage.

They were on their way to join the " Boreas," which was commissioning at nine o'clock, and had met by pre-arrangement the night before at the " Keppel's Head " on the Hard at Portsmouth, that hotel well known to all naval officers as " The Nut," where they had engaged rooms for the night.

The evening—their last evening ashore as gentlemen

Digitized by Google

of leisure instead of youths subject to almost as rigorous a discipline as schoolboys—had been spent as befitted men of independence. They had got rid of a considerable sum of money, having dined at a restaurant, where they tipped the waiter with silver which they could ill afford. Also they drank glasses of port—not very good port—and liqueurs with their coffee, not because they really liked either, but because they thought it mannish so to do.

Afterwards they had been to the "Empire," a music-hall Michael had often heard of as rather exciting but had never visited. But it was not exciting at all. They found it very dull and very crowded—so crowded that they had to be content with "standing room only" in the lounge promenade behind the dress-circle. The entertainment itself was of the poorest—bawdy songs, suggestive gags, indifferent music; but nobody in the audience seemed to pay much attention to what went on on the stage. Neither Michael nor Johnnie had ever been to anything quite like it before. It was strange that people who had paid to come in should treat the performance with such apathy; stranger still that in the promenade they should both be smiled at by flashily dressed and scented ladies of varied charm who were utter strangers to them, and who seemed to be on terms of familiarity with nearly every man they saw.

"I couldn't quite make them out," said Johnnie with an air of mystification as they walked back afterwards. "They seemed awfully anxious to be friendly; but I don't think they were quite ladies. Some of them were having drinks."

"Yes," said Michael. "But did you hear one of them say to that pretty one with the red hair and the big floppy hat who barged into me by accident and apologized, 'Come on, Rosie. What's the good of wasting time on kids?' She was talking about us. I saw her looking at us and turning up her nose."

"Good Lord!" Johnnie exclaimed. "Why?"

Digitized by Google

" I'm blowed if I know," Michael answered, utterly puzzled.

And now, rolling along the Hard the morning afterwards, they both felt rather depressed.

" There she is," said Michael dejectedly, pointing to a pair of buff-coloured masts and the tops of four cream-washed funnels overtopping the roofs of the storehouses in the dockyard.

" Um," Johnnie returned without interest, bitterly regretting the money he had spent and his unaccustomed potations of the evening before. " I wish I hadn't got such a beastly headache."

Even the unexpected salute of a policeman as their cab passed in through the main gates of the dockyard and rumbled over the cobbled roadway towards the South Railway Jetty, where the " Boreas " was lying, could not raise their spirits. Their feelings were much the same as when they had first joined the " Britannia." They were entering upon a new phase of life, and everything would be strange and unfamiliar. The port and liqueurs of the night before were also unfamiliar. Life presented a dismal aspect, jaundiced, wholly unpalatable.

A detachment of Royal Marine Light Infantry, in white helmets and greatcoats with their rifles and full accoutrements, swung on to the jetty as Michael and Johnnie arrived abreast the ship. The band from Forton Barracks, seeing them off, was playing " The Girl I Left Behind Me," and several handcarts, propelled by a working party and containing the men's belongings and the officers' baggage, brought up the rear.

The bulk of the ship's company had already marched down from the depot ship " Duke of Wellington " with mountains of bags and hammocks in more handcarts. An endless procession was passing to and fro, up and down the brows connecting the ship with the jetty, the men carrying white, sausage-shaped hammocks, yellow-painted kit bags, petty officers' sea-chests, artisans' tool-chests, sewing machines, musical instruments, and all manner

Digitized by Google

of heterogeneous bundles and packages containing articles dear to the heart of the simple sailor.

Drawn up on the jetty were a number of tradesmen's carts and other vehicles—including an ancient perambulator with someone's washing. There were also ultra-respectable agents from most of the wine merchants and tobacco firms in the neighbourhood, anxious for orders, eyeing each other with doubt and suspicion, and their pockets and handbags bulging with samples, catalogues, and order forms. They were all waiting to be allowed on board to interview the wine and tobacco caterers of the different officers' messes. It was high noon before most of them gained access, and then only to find that the various contracts had already been placed. The samples they brought with them, however, were always welcome, particularly in the gunroom, where every one was in the usual condition of insolvency.

Making their way on board, Michael and Johnnie went to report their arrival to the commander, a tall, thin officer with a sandy beard and a roving eye, who, with the inevitable telescope under his arm, was gravely superintending the issue of the "commissioning cards" by the master-at-arms and ship's corporals to the men as they filed on board.

"Captain" Henslowe, to give him his courtesy title, seemed worried, and little wonder. He was responsible for everything, and everybody who was anybody at all seemed to require his advice or assistance at a time when he was already overburdened with problems of his own. The captain, who had already joined, was constantly sending for him to inquire into this, that, or the other, while a procession of officers and petty officers were for ever arriving to report things or parties of men "correct" or "present." The boatswain wanted a party to draw stores from the dockyard. The carpenter was anxious about a new knee-hole writing-table for the captain's cabin which should have arrived but hadn't. The ship's cook was having trouble with the galley fire, which

Digitized by Google

couldn't be induced to burn no 'ow, because, on investigation, a discarded suit of overalls was found stuffed in the " Charley Noble." [1] The fleet paymaster, a gaunt officer with a woebegone expression, required some marines to assist an underling to draw money from the dockyard bank. Several men joining the ship had lost their bags and hammocks. A lieutenant required permission to keep a fox-terrier on board. The wardroom messman requested he might be provided with a party to help him to embark the wardroom wine, which was waiting on the jetty.

They all turned to the commander in their distress, and the commander, sighing dolefully at the advent of each fresh interrupter, was rapidly becoming short in his answers and telling people to " Go to hell ! " Small blame to him. One required the patience of a Job and the temper of an archangel to commission a ship and to think of everything.

With something like eight hundred men to be dealt with, the work preparatory to commissioning entailed an enormous amount of finicking labour. It was inevitable that at the outset there should be many square pegs in round holes. It would take months of minor adjustments before the ship could really be called properly organized or efficient, or her crew accustomed to working together.

But without the preliminary work the task would have been impossible, and the " commissioning cards " handed to the men as they came on board summarized the work already done and informed the new arrivals at a glance their parts of the ship, their watch, part of the watch, and sub.[2] Also the numbers of the messes, where to stow their bags and hammocks, and their stations in the boats, in action, or in the unhappy event of fire, collision, or grounding.

[1] " Charley Noble." Navalese for the galley funnel. I can offer no suggestions as to the probable origin of the term.

[2] The seaman portion of a ship's company is divided into two watches, starboard and port, and into four " parts of the ship "—forecastle, foretop, maintop and quarter-deck men. Each watch is again divided into two " parts," and each " part " into two " sub-divisions."

Digitized by Google

The hands of the dockyard clock crept round to nine. A youthful bluejacket bugler, at a nod from the commander, nervously moistened his lips, raised his instrument to sound the " Attention," and followed it, rather quaveringly, with the long fanfare of the " Admiral's salute." The band of a battleship out in the stream played the national anthem. Presently the " Boreas " would have her own band for the daily ritual of hoisting the colours; but to-day she was still in the throes of commissioning and the bandsmen were busy elsewhere.

Officers on deck faced aft and saluted, and men stood to attention as the ensign was slowly hoisted at the staff in the stern. The long whip-like pennant was broken out at the main-masthead and fluttered out on the morning breeze. The bugler, red-faced and breathless but relieved at the successful accomplishment of his task before the eyes of many beholders, sounded the " Carry on," and every one relaxed from their attitudes of rigidity and resumed their normal occupations. A young lieutenant in a glaringly new frock-coat appeared up one of the quarter-deck ladders with a shining telescope tucked under his arm and stood for a moment adjusting his sword belt. He was the officer of the watch, and his presence, together with that of the pennant at the masthead, showed that the " Boreas " was no longer a unit of the reserve, but a fully commissioned ship.

" Come on board to join, sir," said Michael, seizing his opportunity and saluting the commander.

" Names ? " the latter demanded, sticking out his beard and looking Michael and Johnnie up and down with appraising eyes and a worried expression.

The information was given.

The commander grunted. " You've both been at sea before," he barked, noticing that the white patches on their coat collars had lost their newness. " How long ? What ship ? "

" A year, sir. ' Hamilcar.' Channel Squadron," Michael answered, unconsciously copying the senior officer's own

Digitized by Google

abrupt manner of speech. "Mr. Barker and myself were shipmates, sir."

"Small—damned small—mere child!" the commander snorted, half to himself. "Grow a little, Mr. Bray. Grow quickly. No time to talk now," he went on. "Lot to do. Find your way—gunroom—senior midshipman—got your station—orders—knows what I want. Off with you!"

They saluted and turned away, and presently, having found somebody to help them on board with their belongings, descended the two steep ladders leading to the gunroom flat.

The ten other midshipmen and naval cadets belonging to the ship had already joined. Four of them were senior snotties unknown to Michael even by name; but of the others two were midshipmen and four naval cadets fresh from the "Britannia" whom Michael remembered as miserable "news" when he was a lordly fourth-termer. One of them, a quiet inoffensive, podgy-faced youth called Hayes answering to the uncomplimentary nickname of "Pimple Face," Michael had always disliked, and for no real reason at all except that he himself had a dread of acquiring his disfiguring complaint.

"Hullo, young Hayes!" he said, going round to where that youth was unpacking a tin case and stowing its contents in his chest.

"Hullo, Bray!" came the timid reply.

"Hullo be blowed!" growled Michael truculently, still smarting at the commander's remark anent his stature and anxious to show his superiority over someone. "Why the blazes do you want to leave your rotten gear sculling about all over the place, blast you?"

"I'm awfully sorry," said Hayes very humbly, pulling aside his belongings. "There isn't much room, is there?"

Evidently Michael was a person of some importance, someone to be placated. How was Hayes to know that Michael, though he had been a year at sea and interlarded his conversation with fierce oaths when he wanted to

Digitized by Google

impress people, was only a humble crab himself—a mere youth of sixteen with over eighteen months to run before he could become a senior snotty, would be allowed to smoke, and become immune from the degrading process of being bent over the gunroom table and castigated for his misdeeds?

"No room!" Michael snorted aggressively. "You've got a deuced sight more room than I ever had when I first went to sea! You beastly warts seem to want everything. Lord knows what the Service is coming to!"

Hayes apologized again.

"All right. You needn't worry," said Michael magnanimously, thinking that perhaps he had gone a little too far. Indeed, if one of the senior midshipmen had happened to hear what had passed things might become actively uncomfortable for Michael. The privileges of senior snotties, among which figured the right of saying exactly what one liked to the juniors, were jealously guarded.

"I'm sorry I cursed you," he went on with an air of great condescension. "Fact is, I've got a bit of a liver this morning."

"Phew!" Hayes whistled. "Fancy that!"

Michael glared. Was Hayes being funny at his expense?

No; a glance at his face showed that he was merely innocently impressed. Only men had livers in the early morning.

"You're not such a bad sort of blighter really," Michael continued, "though your pimples are pretty ghastly."

"I know they are," Hayes admitted with a blush. "But I can't get rid of the beastly things. My mother's given me some ointment and——"

"The less you say about that the better," Michael advised. "Otherwise you'll get your leg pulled like the devil. But, look here, Hayes, if there's anything you want to know you just hop along to me and ask. I'll jolly soon put you up to all the tips."

Digitized by Google

From the way he said it one might have imagined that he had been at sea for at least a decade; but months count almost as years in the life of a junior midshipman.

"Thanks awfully, Bray," said Hayes, vastly grateful and not a little impressed. "It's frightfully good of you."

"Oh, that's all right," said Michael, stalking off as majestically as he was able. He felt rather proud of himself. It was indeed refreshing, not to say comforting, to have someone whom one could patronize and keep in his proper place.

Michael Bray — *Chapter XIV*

THE commissioning passed off without undue incident. For the next few days officers and men were accustoming themselves to their new surroundings, and religiously once a day, if not twice, they were drilled at fire quarters, collision and grounding stations, general quarters, and the various other evolutions. There came a short trip to sea for a steam trial, when the "Boreas" worked up to full speed and pounded along at something over twenty knots to make certain that her engines and boilers were in thorough working order after their long spell of disuse in the reserve. Except for a minor adjustment or two everything passed off satisfactorily, and on the conclusion of the trial the ship returned into harbour and took up her old berth alongside the South Railway Jetty.

Finally the inspection by the commander-in-chief, when the admiral walked round the ship asking questions and saw the men at their various stations to satisfy himself that the ship was in all respects ready for service. Then came the sailing orders, ordering the "Boreas" to sail for the China Station at ten o'clock on the following Monday morning, and to proceed at "economical speed" to Hong-Kong, calling at Gibraltar and Malta, thence

Digitized by Google

through the Suez Canal, and touching afterwards at Aden, Colombo, and Singapore.

It had been arranged that Uncle James and Diana should spend the final four days of Michael's sojourn in England at an hotel in Southsea in order to see the last of him. He showed them over the ship and gave them tea on board; but all too soon came the last evening ashore, when Michael and Johnnie dined with Uncle James and Diana at their hotel, and afterwards walked with them across the darkened and deserted Southsea Common and to the dockyard gates on their way back to the ship. Johnnie, though he would dearly have loved to walk with Diana, played his part loyally, walking hastily on with Uncle James and chattering volubly to retain his attention while giving Diana and Michael a chance to lag behind and talk.

"D'you realize this is the last time I shall see you for over two years?" said the girl huskily, pressing his hand.

"Buck up, old lady!" said he, feeling rather mournful himself and squeezing her hand in reply. "I simply hate leaving you."

"Dear old thing!" she whispered gratefully. "You will think of me, Mike, won't you? And you'll write ever so often?"

"Bet your life I will."

"You swear it?" Diana demanded, halting suddenly and looking him full in the eyes in the dim half-light. "On your solemn word of honour?"

"On my honour," Michael replied, suddenly realizing how much Diana meant to him.

They were children—mere children; but at that moment nothing in Michael's life seemed quite of such importance as the loss of Diana's companionship.

A quarter of an hour later the final good-byes had been bidden at the dockyard gates and Michael, with a strange heaviness in his heart, was walking through the dockyard with Johnnie on their way back to the ship.

Digitized by Google

"Deuced nice and pretty girl that cousin of yours," said Johnnie.

"Of course she is," sniffed Michael, in no mood for conversation. "Oh, curse the rotten old navy!" he added in a sudden fit of petulance. "I don't half like going abroad."

His companion stared. "I thought you were so keen," he said.

"Oh, I dunno," said Michael dismally.

Came the morning of departure, and the crowds on the South Railway Jetty to see the last of their husbands, sons, relations, friends, and sweethearts. There were officers' wives and parents and brothers and sisters; petty officers' and men's wives and sisters and other people's sisters; and children walking, children in perambulators and go-carts, babies in arms. Many of the women wept unrestrainedly into handkerchiefs; all were mournful and depressed—even Mrs. Kilpatrick, the captain's wife, arranging some flowers in his cabin, was misty-eyed and husky about the voice. Mrs. Sayers, the wife of Benjamin Sayers, A.B., on the jetty, cried copiously over her husband's broad bosom.

A whistle blew and the gangs of dockyard riggers standing by to cast off the hawsers began to busy themselves. The captain's wife appeared on the quarter-deck with her husband and halted a moment at the top of the brow to press his hand for the last time before stepping ashore. She had a brave smile on her face—Heaven and Mrs. Kilpatrick only knew the aching distress that lay in her heart.

The captain, waving a hand, walked forward to the bridge and joined the pilot. The final farewells were said on the jetty, and there followed a scurry for the brows on the part of the men still ashore before connexion with the ship was severed.

"Let go your bow wires and breasts," came a voice from the bridge.

The ends of the hawsers splashed into the water, and

Digitized by Google

within a few minutes the " Boreas," with a couple of dockyard paddle tugs the other side of her and wisps of white steam coming from her escape pipes, was slowly being pulled out into the stream preparatory to turning in the narrow harbour. A gigantic white ensign flapped at the peak. On the quarter-deck the band blared one of Sousa's marches with more vigour than accuracy as if to drown the prevailing sorrow in unadulterated noise. Beside them stood the guard of marines in their red tunics and white helmets.

The water swirled under the stern as the propellers revolved and the ship turned. The jetty became a sea of fluttering handkerchiefs. Officers and men on board waved as the ship slowly started to forge ahead towards the harbour entrance. The bandmaster, a sentimental fellow with a newly married wife, caused his musicians to break into " Home, Sweet Home." That was the last straw. Women on the jetty sobbed and cried. Even a dockyard matie swallowed a quid of borrowed tobacco in his emotion. " Go and tell the bandmaster to stop playing that damned tune ! " said the commander irritably to his midshipman A.D.C.

The ship gathered speed. A bugle shrilled, and the band, finishing " Home, Sweet Home " in a final blaring discord, broke into the " few bars of a lively march," the Admiral's salute, as the guard presented arms to the old " Victory," flying the white, red-crossed flag of the commander-in-chief. On steamed the cruiser—past the Gunwharf, past Fort Blockhouse, until, turning to negotiate the narrow channel leading to Spithead and the open sea, she disappeared behind Garrison Point.

A straggling, pitiful procession of heavy-hearted women and children found their way slowly back through the dockyard. The world seemed suddenly very grey and very dreary. Three years. Three whole years !

On the front by Southsea Castle, Diana and Uncle James waved their handkerchiefs as the " Boreas "

Digitized by Google

steamed down the buoyed channel within a few hundred yards of the shore and turned to make her way seaward at increased speed. Michael, standing on the boat-deck, as he had arranged, focused his telescope on his cousin and waved lustily in answer, until, as the distance increased, Diana's figure became invisible against its background.

They turned to leave after watching the ship until she passed out beyond the Horse Sand Fort and had vanished in the slight haze rolling in from the open sea.

The Reverend James patted Diana's head. "Cheer up, my daughter," he said. "I am sorry to lose Michael myself. I shall miss him."

"Not nearly so much as I shall," sniffed Diana, full of a new understanding.

By noon the "Boreas" was abeam of St. Catherine's Point, the southern extremity of the Isle of Wight, and an hour and a half later the faint purple outline of the mainland to starboard was slowly fading away to nothing. It was their last glimpse of England.

At four o'clock the next morning the powerful flashing light on Ushant was showing up over the horizon on the port bow, and the ship was butting her way southward against a rapidly rising wind and sea. Already some of the junior midshipmen had paid tribute to Neptune. On the crowded mess-decks many of the younger men lay like logs, hardly caring whether it was Christmas or Easter, wishing only to die—to die speedily.

Michael Bray — *Chapter XV*

DURING the passage to China, Michael saw more of the world than he had ever seen before—Malta and the Mediterranean; the Suez Canal and the Red Sea; the barren rock of Aden and the Indian Ocean; Colombo, where the ship was invaded by a horde of paunchy,

Digitized by Google

dusky-faced, glib-tongued merchants laden with brooches, necklaces, and other jewellery set with sapphires, rubies, moonstones, and cat's eyes, seemingly worth an emperor's ransom, but in reality specially manufactured by the gross for the enticement of globe-trotters and simple sailors. It was here, indeed, that Michael, affluent in the possession of the remains of a month's pay, proudly bought a silver brooch set with moonstones for Diana's birthday, the first piece of jewellery, except for a silver bangle purchased at Gibraltar, that he had ever given her.

The Straits of Malacca and the fragrant offshore breeze laden with the scent of spice and flowering vegetation; Singapore; the China Sea with its sky of cerulean blue, sea like lapis lazuli and prehistoric-looking junks with picturesque brown matting sails—everything was new and everything was interesting.

But Michael's chief and most vivid recollection of the trip was more unromantic—merely the stifling heat in the crowded gunroom, whose scuttles had always to be closed at sea due to their proximity to the waterline, the sickening motion as the ship rolled in the heavy Indian Ocean swell, the noisome and unnameable smells emanating from the pantry, the fierce scramble for meals in which people did not hesitate to use their fists in fighting for places at table, and the unpalatable and monotonous food which was daily set before them.

It was before the days when bakeries were fitted on board all large men-of-war, before the time when jam, pickles, tinned milk, and other more or less ordinary articles of diet ashore figured in the naval standard ration. Moreover, the "Boreas" had no refrigerating chamber for the preservation of fresh provisions, and though a limited quantity of ice was made and provided daily in really hot weather for use in the gunroom ice-chest, fresh food invariably ran out after thirty-six hours at sea.

The state of affairs was partly due to the rapacity and

Digitized by Google

indifference of the gunroom messman, a surly fellow with a perennial grievance as to the abnormal appetites of junior naval officers. Well aware that in accordance with the usual practice a Chinese messman would step into his shoes the moment the ship arrived at Hong-Kong, he devoted more energy to the rapid making of money than to providing proper food for the mess.

Edibles bought from the ship's stores or from the canteen were cheaper as a rule than those bought ashore, and quality was a second consideration. So the gunroom food consisted largely of pea-soup—very cheap and filling, but unpalatable in hot weather; tinned salmon inadequately disguised; "sharks," or sardines, unadorned, devilled, or fried in noisome batter and glorified into fritters; salt pork fresh from the cask and still stiff and crackling with brine; corned beef out of tins—semi-liquid in the heat; odoriferous canteen cheese; oleaginous tinned butter like train-oil; and, instead of bread, hexagonal ship's biscuits of greyish appearance and flint-like consistency duly stamped with the broad arrow. Until it was discovered and stopped the perfidious knave of a messman even tried to charge for the free allowance of lime-juice issued daily by ancient custom as an anti-scorbutic while the ship was in the tropics.

The snotties, however, most of whom were blessed with the appetites of sharks and the digestions of ostriches, were not over particular what they ate. It mattered little to them if there was a lack of proper table utensils, and they had sometimes to drink from disused cigarette tins. On the contrary, it was rather good fun. They were always hungry. A midshipman's paradise is ever a well-laden table, and to eke out the messman's parsimonious fare jam, potted meat, tins of cocoa, and biscuits could be bought as "extras," though at prices which would have caused even a profiteering grocer of the Great War to go green with envy. The sums charged, however, worried the young gentlemen not at all, and they seldom, if ever, inquired into them. And, after all, what did it

Digitized by Google

matter? Their mess bills were deducted automatically and arbitrarily from their pay at the end of the month, and as most of them were already accustomed to living in a state of utter insolvency with their pay accounts in red ink,[1] ten or fifteen shillings' worth of additional debt signified nothing in their improvident minds.

It may have been in consequence of the food, and the absence of regular exercise ashore, coupled with the lack of green vegetables, that caused some of the snotties to achieve crops of painful boils, generally upon a portion of their anatomies which made sitting a veritable penance. Michael, to his great relief, escaped them, for boils and prickly heat endured together were an abominable invention of the Evil One. There was always some amusement to be had, moreover, out of being funny at the expense of the sufferers if they happened to be junior to oneself. Sympathy for such an affliction, until one became afflicted oneself, simply did not exist so far as the gun-room was concerned.

In 1900 the victualling in the navy was sadly in need of reorganization, and men suffered accordingly, and in silence. Preserved provisions were sometimes kept for years on end, being sent from victualling depot to victualling depot all over the world at regular intervals of five years before finally issued. Indeed, it was not uncommon for a cask of salt beef or pork dating from the seventies or eighties to be served out to a ship on a foreign station. The contents, black, shrivelled, and permeated with brine and saltpetre after their long immersion, were as hard as oak or tough as leather, according to the amount of liquid that had evaporated during the peregrinations of the cask round the inhabited globe. The meat resembled food exhumed from some Egyptian tomb, and as often as not had to be condemned as unfit for human consumption and thrown overboard immediately the casks were unheaded.

[1] When an officer or man is in debt to the Crown, his debit balance in the pay book is shown in red ink.

Digitized by Google

Tied by strict discipline and steeped in the conservative tradition of the Service, the seamen could not raise their voices in public protest. That they growled enough in private goes without saying; they would not have been proper sailors if they hadn't; but the condition of affairs was taken philosophically and rather as a matter of course. History even relates that enterprising sailors amused themselves by carving tobacco boxes and other knick-knacks from pieces of salt junk served out to them as rations, and that the tough material took on a wonderful polish like mahogany. It is a sober fact that ship's biscuits, pierced in the middle and stained and polished, were often converted into photograph frames.

It was a blessed relief when the ship arrived at Hong-Kong and the passengers dispersed to their various ships, for the "Boreas" had been so uncomfortable and overcrowded that it was impossible for her proper crew to settle down on board, or for the commander to start the good work of drilling the ship's company into a state of tolerable efficiency and to make the vessel herself as clean and as smart as a ship could be.

"She's a disgusting sight!" he said to Challoner, the first lieutenant, when the last boatload of passengers disappeared with their bags and hammocks piled up in the stern sheets of a cutter. "Foul—filthy—beastly!" His nose wrinkled with disgust, for he was a proud commander and had a reputation to keep up.

"Number One," who was also the gunnery lieutenant, nodded in agreement. "My mess-decks are like a pig-sty, sir, what with the ship being filthy when we took her over, the coaling on passage, and gear piled up in every corner and men living and sleeping all over the place. And the paintwork, sir," he added with a sigh. "My aunt, the paintwork!—I'm afraid I'll have to come down on you for a good many hands before she's really decent below."

"Never knew a first-lieutenant who didn't," the commander grumbled good-naturedly.

Digitized by Google

"Then there's the gunnery," Challoner continued cheerfully. "The guns' crews want drill and plenty of practice."

"Confound all you specialists!" growled his senior. "I suppose that wretched torpedo lieutenant will want all his braves too, and between the pair of you I'll have nobody left to get the ship clean."

"I'll bet you he will, sir," smiled Challoner, shrugging his shoulders. "He's already been moaning about the state of his submerged flats."

The commander sniffed. "Robbers!" he exclaimed. "Thieves! How the Hades shall I get the ship clean, eh?"

"We'll do it somehow, sir," Number One told him.

Fiercely energetic and something of a martinet on duty, especially to midshipmen, whom he sometimes harried without mercy, the first-lieutenant was nearing the promotion zone. Upon his work for the next year or two depended his advancement to the rank of commander—a promotion which was governed entirely by selection. And competition was fierce—very fierce. Many otherwise promising careers were wrecked by seemingly trivial incidents, bad inspection reports from a flag officer to whom cleanliness was a fetish, stupid disagreements with seniors in which though as often as not the juniors had right upon their side they had not been tactful enough to keep their mouths shut and their opinions to themselves. In 1900, moreover, it was not a little difficult for a keen gunnery officer to ensure the efficiency of his department. Usually he struggled in the face of determined opposition on the part of seniors, who were apt to regard gunnery rather as an unnecessary invention of the devil and a hindrance to the normal routine of immaculate cleanliness and proficiency in evolutions, which were then considered as synonymous with efficiency.

Challoner was a zealous officer, and though keen on drill on board with small arms as carried out on the parade ground at Whale Island, the gunnery school at Portsmouth

Digitized by Google

and the Alma Mater of all gunnery officers, he was by no means " all gas and gaiters," which, according to the irreverent, were the hall-marks of all those officers who bore the mystic (G) in front of their names in the " Navy List." On the contrary, he well saw the evils of a spit and polish regime carried on at the expense of battle-worthiness, and in his mind the ability to hit an enemy in action always lay paramount.

For some weeks after arrival at Hong-Kong the commander, aided and abetted by Number One, indulged in a veritable orgy of drills and exercises to smarten up the ship's company. Regularly every morning and afternoon they practised some evolution or other, first in slow time to accustom the men to their stations, and then in quick time. And, as regularly, the commander danced frenziedly on the bridge, howling objurgations through his megaphone and swearing by all his gods, and they were without number, that the " Boreas's " crew were the slackest, laziest, most lubberly set of scoundrelly old washerwomen he had ever had the evil misfortune to be shipmates with. They were knaves, rogues, vagabonds of unsavoury antecedents and most doubtful respectability.

" Bugler ! " he shouted one morning, when the bower anchor was being laid out for exercise and everybody upon the forecastle seemed to be shouting and giving orders at the same moment. " Bugler ! Sound the ' Still.' "

The four sharp notes blared out and the uproar stopped abruptly, men ceasing what they were doing and standing rigidly to attention while the commander, megaphone in hand and his cap cocked over one eye, advanced to the fore side of the upper bridge and stood there like a graven image glowering upon the multitude gazing up at him.

" Noise ! " he suddenly exploded in his great bull voice. " Damned noise ! Uproar ! Disorder ! Everybody giving tongue ! You're all chattering as if you were at a mothers' meeting or a west country beanfeast ! You

Digitized by Google

are supposed to be getting out the bower anchor. Looks to me like a Saturday night riot in Queen Street, Portsea. This is a ship, not a debating club, and the only people allowed to raise their voices are the officers! When we drill we drill in silence," he went on more quietly. "Silence, I said! We should be able to hear a pin drop on the deck during general drill. Try again, and no noise please. Bugler, sound the 'Carry on.'"

Afterwards in the smoking-room he was heard remarking to the first-lieutenant that the ship's company weren't such a bad lot of pirates after all—quite a smart crowd, in fact, though by the time he'd finished with them they'd be smarter still, or his name wasn't what it was.

In his heart the commander was proud of his men and proud of his ship, which was as it should be, for to him there was no ship in the world like the "Boreas." It would have been the same had she been the veriest old crock in creation. She was his ship, and that was all about it.

And in spite of his loud voice and uncomplimentary and caustic remarks the ship's company soon came to love him, for he was eminently fair and just in his dealings with all men and had a warm corner in his heart even for rogues who got drunk every time they went ashore but worked well on board. Moreover, within a very short time he knew all their qualities and faults and failings, even their names, and the use of a man's surname carried far greater conviction on the lower deck than a "Hi, you able seaman there!"

"Gor blimey!" they said to each other, "he's got us all ticked off pat! There's no bilkin' the Bloke.[1] He's got an eye like a nawk an' a nose like a blurry grey-'ound; but 'e's a proper gent."

And when they were not drilling or exercising in the boats they were titivating the ship and painting her until her sides shone like polished ebony, her holystoned decks

[1] **The Bloke. The universal lower-deck nickname for the executive officer.**

Digitized by Google

became spotless, and her mess-decks and flats became glorious in glistening white enamel, burnished steel stanchions, and twinkling brasswork. Even Challoner professed himself satisfied, for gunnery, in spite of the commander's remarks on the subject, had not been neglected.

There was no doubt about it, the "Boreas" was a good ship.

Michael Bray — *Chapter XVI*

THE gunroom of the "Boreas" was no better and no worse than many other gunrooms. It was merely typical. Its inhabitants were a riotous and irrepressible crew who indulged in much horseplay at each other's expense, and after dinner on guest-nights cheerfully broke the furniture and tore the clothes off each other's backs, just like any other gunroom. Not that there was any over-indulgence in liquor to account for this destruction of valuable property. Very small quantities of Japanese chemical beer and Marsala were calculated to produce feelings of hysterical hilarity in youths already overburdened with animal spirits and full of a love of excitement, and ragging would still have been carried on if they had drunk nothing but water.

It was all intended good-naturedly, though it was trying, for instance, forcibly to be bereft of one's clothes and to be pushed overboard through a scuttle into the middle of Hong-Kong harbour at ten o'clock at night. This particular incident arose over a violent argument as to whether a human being could insinuate himself through a circular port-hole in the event of disaster, and Michael, being one of the smallest, was the unwilling victim of the experiment. The water was quite warm, and he fell in with a beautiful splash; but it was unfortunate that the ship's side had been newly

Digitized by Google

painted black and the waterline salmon-pink. Fresh paint adhered, and Michael, to his intense disgust, was forced to make an undignified return over the gangway and upper deck in a state of barbaric nudity mitigated only by a borrowed handkerchief and many streaks of paint.

The destruction of clothing did not much signify in the minds of the snotties, for their belongings were pooled, so to speak; and if anyone was asked to a function and lacked the necessary apparel his messmates could generally supply it.

"You might lend me that flannel coat of yours, old chap," one would hear in the chest flat.

"Right you are, old bird. Can you let me have your brown shoes for this afternoon and a decent tie? I've got to go and call on some people my mater has written to. I'll have to get hold of one of Shorty's collars, curse it! Yours don't fit, and I haven't a respectable one of my own."

There was always a shortage of white flannel trousers, however, which, since most of the young gentlemen varied in size, were not so readily borrowable. And one of the senior midshipmen, a well-covered fellow, having none clean of his own and being unable to squeeze himself into anyone else's, once attended a tennis party arrayed, with seamanlike ingenuity, in a pair of nether garments that rightly belonged to a sleeping suit. It was in the days when striped trousers were still sometimes worn for the noble game, and though the pyjama trousers were of flowing and somewhat peculiar cut, they might easily have passed muster had not the tassels of the girdle descended in the heat of a strenuous rally. The hostess, a broad-minded lady with sons of her own, was much amused, and the incident and subsequent explanations considerably enlivened the afternoon's proceedings. When the commander came to hear of it, however, he sent for the young officer in question and soundly rated him for conduct unbecoming of an officer and a gentleman.

Digitized by Google

"Dammit!" he exclaimed, "suppose the things had come down?"

"Please sir, they couldn't," the snotty answered without a smile on his face. "I was wearing a belt. I clean forgot that the tassels might work loose, sir."

"Call yourself a seaman!" the commander grunted, averting his head to hide his amusement. "Go on," he added. "Run away, boy! Don't do it again. This ship has hitherto enjoyed a blameless reputation."

Peter Crawshay, the sub-lieutenant and the president of the gunroom, was in no way comparable with the gruff Lendon, the stern disciplinarian and autocrat of the "Hamilcar." A weak-kneed, boneless creature, he had no idea of keeping order or maintaining a good tone in the mess, and provided his own well-being and comfort were not interfered with he took little interest in what went on. He was not the best type of sub to be ruler of the destinies of the twelve snotties the ship carried, for he had not the character to make himself respected, and alternated between sudden bouts of favouritism which undermined discipline and spasms of bullying when his favourites took advantage of his weakness.

One had only to glance into his cabin to gauge the true nature of the man. It had violet silk curtains and a bunk-spread to match worked with his initials, useless silver knick-knacks in profusion, a toilet rack crammed with bottles and jars containing highly scented oils and unguents for the beautifying of his face and person, and many photographs of young women, mostly blatant and all signed with Christian names. The sub, who was certainly good-looking in a feeble sort of way, was adored by many "dear young things," as he patronizingly called them.

With no private means beyond a small allowance over and above his pay of five shillings a day, he nevertheless possessed an extensive wardrobe acquired on credit. Always immaculately turned out, his creased

Digitized by Google

trousers, shining shoes, silk socks to match his ties, and coloured shirts which harmonized gently with both, were objects of admiration and some ridicule to those of his messmates who cared less for their appearance. But Crawshay was eminently a " poodle-faker," otherwise a ladies' man. He played no games which involved any great physical exertion, had never been known to walk if he could obtain a vehicle. But he shone at afternoon tea-parties which most people of his age would have shunned like the plague. The merry rattle of tea-cups and chatter of a drawing-room attracted him like a magnet.

He liked to pose as the strong, silent hero of fiction, and mothers with marriageable daughters, taken in by his appearance and good manners, secretly intrigued by his wavy hair, lazy blue eyes, and long eyelashes, were wont to refer to him as " that dear Mr. Crawshay ; such a charming young man."

And with the daughters, if they happened to be pretty, the sub started an acquaintance with a studied aloofness which was calculated to make them think him something of a misogynist, and therefore all the more desirable in their eyes. But in course of time, when he had accepted invitations to picnics, tea-parties, dinners, and dances, he unfroze by degrees until his acquaintances with the opposite sex ripened into flirtations. He was never happy unless in the throes of a love-affair. His likes and dislikes, however, were ruled entirely by his emotions, and it was noticeable that he was never on terms of friendship with girls whose worthiness was their only asset. Prettiness alone attracted him. He would have been as happy in the company of a good-looking barmaid as with a girl of his own walk in life.

Glorying in his affairs, he would boast of his numerous conquests to any man who cared to listen. Whenever he gave tea-parties on board, however, he was always at pains to conceal certain of his more flamboyant photographs. Indeed, on one occasion when a young

Digitized by Google

woman he fancied volunteered to darn his socks and to press his ties, he suffered a few evil moments when she started gaily to rummage in his chest of drawers.

"Allow me," he said politely, fearful of what might be revealed. "I'll bring them all ashore the next time I come. It's perfectly sweet of you to do them."

Crawshay was despised of men for his effeminacy and want of character. The snotties, who speedily came to dislike him, were wont even to declare that he curled his hair, brushed his eyebrows, and manicured his finger-nails, all sure signs of degeneracy in their intolerant eyes. Certainly he scented himself, a fact which added fuel to the fire and evoked scurrilous lampoons from those who should have looked up to him for guidance.

Had it not been for Hartopp, the senior snotty, a fierce, red-headed young gentleman who possessed all the qualities of firmness and command that Crawshay lacked, the midshipmen of the "Boreas" might have gone to the dogs. It was Hartopp who beat them unmercifully for indulging in the various sins beloved of snotties; Hartopp who was always sent for by the commander or first-lieutenant if there was anything lacking in their discipline or deportment. It was also Hartopp who sometimes held trials in the school-place on those who offended.

Complete with wig, a jury of three junior snotties, prosecuting and defending counsel, and ushers to the court, he once indicted a young officer for the crime of outraging the bounds of discipline by "directing the business end of an exploding soda-water bottle towards the august person of a senior midshipman, whereby the cork came into violent contact . . .," etc. The judge at once overruled the verdict of "Not guilty, me lord," shouted for his cane, and, assisted by the accuser, prosecuting counsel, and ushers, gave each member of the jury, as well as defending counsel and the accused, a dozen of the best with which to remember him. Hartopp was therefore something of a power in the land,

Digitized by Google

and his hand was as heavy as he was ruthless. Michael happened to be one of the jury.

A glutton for games and a demon for exercise, he regarded lawn tennis as a game fit only for girls and invalids. Cricket, Rugby football, hockey, and strenuous paper-chases, whence they returned gasping with exhaustion after running ten or twelve miles over the most difficult country he could find, were more in his line. And it was he who sometimes routed the snotties out of their hammocks at an unearthly hour in the morning, made them pull themselves ashore, and then took them scampering round the gravel parade ground at Wei-hai-wei to keep them fit. He also took upon himself the duty of training the midshipman's boat's crew, putting down their beer and tobacco with a firm hand, and religiously every morning at six-fifteen, when they did not land, wet or fine, flat calm or chilly breeze, bullied the sluggards from their hammocks and took them away pulling in the galley, stroking the boat himself. He took no excuses and was no respecter of persons. Even the senior snotties stood in awe of him.

"Come on! Roust out, you lazy devil!" he used to exclaim, halting by somebody's hammock and shaking it violently. "The sun's scorching your eyelids! Get a move on!"

"Awfully sorry, Hartopp. I can't pull this morning," grumbled the sleepy one, racking his wits for a suitable excuse.

"Sorry be hanged! Why can't you pull?"

"I had a late trip last night in the picquet-boat and am entitled to a lie in till seven, for one thing," the tired young gentleman explained with praiseworthy ingenuity.

"The picquet-boat drew fires before ten, so you're a purple liar!" said Hartopp grimly, interlarding the remark in the usual gunroom way. "Think again."

"I've got an awful blister on my stern, if you really want to know," the recalcitrant one excused himself,

Digitized by Google

surprised at his own temerity. "I got it yesterday, and if I go away pulling this morning it may burst. Really I have, Hartopp," he continued, seeing the look of contemptuous incredulity on the senior snotty's face. "I'll swear I have. It's jolly painful." He groaned to show how painful it really was.

"Blistered be sugared!" Hartopp flung back. "It's grown during the night, I suppose? I'll have a look at it, if you like."

"Oh, no," came the objection. "It's much too private for that."

"Well, either you come pulling or else you see the doctor and go on the sick list. Which is it to be?"

"You are a swine, Hartopp! You know jolly well I've fixed up tennis this afternoon and that if I go sick I'll—— Ow, you devil! Let go my ear!"

"If you aren't out before I count ten I'll cut you down," said Hartopp grimly. "And that's for calling me a swine," he added, giving the ear a final and ferocious tweak. "One . . . two. . . .

The delinquent crawled slowly from his hammock.

"I call it deuced hard being treated like this," he grumbled. "I might just as well be a junior wart from the way you carry on. Because you're senior snotty and six months senior to me you think——"

"I can't beat you with a stick, perhaps," Hartopp interrupted fiercely, "but I can fight you, and jolly well will if I have any more of your lip, senior snotty or not. Go on! Shove your gear on and come on deck, otherwise I'll be angry."

And in spite of the most strenuous opposition, he practised that boat's crew to such an extent that, at a regatta held some time later, they wiped the floor with every other midshipman's boat's crew on the station and wrested the silver challenge cup from the flagship, whose snotties had hitherto rather fancied themselves unassailable in all matters of sport. To be soundly beaten by comparative new-comers to the station only

Digitized by Google

added fuel to the fire. It was an abominable impertinence, an unjustifiable insult, and all the rest of it ; and to show their intense displeasure at the result they studiously avoided the triumphal glances of the "Boreas's" crowd for at least two days afterwards whenever they happened to meet ashore Their pride was very much hurt, more particularly so because the flagship's commander, a peppery little gentleman who fancied his own midshipmen and had lost a considerable sum in bets, chided them for a lazy set of ruffians, which really they were not.

It was thanks also, to the indomitable energy of Hartopp that the "Boreas" snotties soon became as thin as rakes and as tough as indiarubber. Even Johnnie Barker, the champion eater of the gunroom, who, when really on his mettle, could eat two pounds' weight of cold and glutinous plum pudding straight out of a tin in the record time of one minute and forty-eight seconds, shed most of his superfluous tissue and found himself able to walk eighteen or twenty miles in considerable heat with a gun, cartridges and impedimenta without feeling one whit the worse.

And Michael, who became thinner and more wiry every day, sprouted almost visibly. Very soon he had to write home for more money wherewith to buy new clothes. "I think I must be growing quite a lot," he said in a letter to Diana. "The uniform white bags I brought out with me are already nearly two inches over my ankles and can't be let down any more. They are jolly tight, too, and I can hardly bend without nearly bursting them. You might tell Uncle James, and also let him know I'll soon be wanting new tunics as well. My present ones are tight in the sleeves and beastly short in the body, even with nothing on underneath but a thin vest. I expect I shall have to order a whole lot of blue gear when we go out of whites, and I must have some new boots."

Uncle James certainly was a little startled when the

Digitized by Google

full tale of Michael's sartorial requirements came to his knowledge. Bless the boy! He must be growing like a lighthouse in the making, and what clothes he had not grown out of he seemed to have lost or had stolen.

But Michael was very fit, fitter than ever he had been in his life, even at school.

Michael Bray — *Chapter XVII*

TROUBLE was brewing in North China.

"The Boxers,"[1] a society which had for its objects the suppression of Christianity and the expulsion or extermination of foreigners, had become a power in the land. Originating in the province of Shantung they carried out a ritual composed largely of gymnastic posturing calculated to impress their ignorant countrymen, while, among other quaint conceits, the initiated were said to be immune from bullets and to be capable of walking upon sunbeams, arresting the flow of rivers, and creating fires by their mere gesture.

The new religion spread like wildfire. The cause was espoused by many local governors and viceroys, and the influence of the Boxers was manifest even in Court circles and the Tsung-li Yamên, or Imperial Chinese Parliament. Their creed, moreover, was immensely popular with the main mass of their superstitious and uneducated countrymen, for the extermination of the hated foreigners meant the destruction or seizure of foreign property, thus satisfying the innate Chinese propensity for robbery and loot.

And that crafty and bloodthirsty old lady, the Dowager Empress of China, took very half-hearted measures to subdue the movement, despite her repeated and most

[1] The real name of the society was "I-ho-chüan," or "Patriotic Harmonious Fists," roughly translated into English by the word "Boxers."

Digitized by Google

solemn assurances to the European Ministers in the Legations at Pekin. Indeed, privately in sympathy with a project designed to rid the Celestial Empire of the detestable "foreign devils," the old lady did all in her power secretly to encourage it. She took the line of opportunism, doubtless thinking the moment propitious for the massacre or expulsion of foreigners before reinforcements could arrive from abroad to help them.

Except for the handful of troops and marines which formed the Legation guards in Pekin there were few outward and visible signs in the country of the real might of the European powers, the United States, and Japan. There were, of course, the foreigners' navies; but what did a Manchu official in Pekin, who had never seen the sea, care for a naval demonstration over a hundred miles away at Taku? His idea of a man-of-war was probably that of an exaggerated *sampan*.

The smouldering fire of rebellion burst rapidly into flame. European railway employees, missionaries in outlying districts and their native converts, were barbarously murdered by marauding bands of Chinese and their hacked and bleeding bodies dragged through the streets for the sport of the populace. White women were outraged before the eyes of their husbands and fathers prior to hideous mutilation and the merciful release of death. Little children were hewn in pieces with iron swords, or their tiny bodies, still breathing, tossed to and fro on pikes. Missions, railway stations, and other valuable property went up in fire and in smoke.

Imperial edicts, at first decreeing the suppression of the Boxers in an evasive and unsatisfactory manner, soon became openly and violently anti-foreign. The Imperial Chinese Army, portions of which had been trained by German military officers and were armed with weapons of the latest pattern, openly sided with the rebels when called out to subdue them. Rifles, ancient muskets, iron swords and pikes were readily obtainable from the various arsenals and armouries, and, encouraged

Digitized by Google

by its devotees that the cause was a holy one, thousands flocked to don the red sashes and headgear of the Boxer movement.

By early in June, 1900, war had virtually been declared by the Chinese upon all foreigners, and the Legations at Pekin, lying cheek-by-jowl with the densely populated native city and guarded only by four hundred men hurried thither from the fleet of Taku before railway communication ceased, were cut off from the outside world.

Pekin, about one hundred miles from the coast, was connected with the sea by the railway passing through the treaty-port and important commercial centre of Tientsin, which, situated some thirty miles from the sea and the celebrated Taku forts, contained a large European population of all nationalities. The " concessions," or European settlement, complete with dwelling-houses, clubs, hotels, public buildings, shops, racecourse, polo ground, and many " godowns," or warehouses, was a small but prosperous European town on the banks of the Pei-ho River and close to the large walled native city of Tientsin proper. The settlement, divided up according to nationalities, ruled itself and had its own magistrates and police. Tientsin, moreover, was the export centre for all the important merchandise of North China, and many of the inhabitants were wealthy, enjoying all the amenities of life and living in comfort and luxury. But except for a little company of volunteers raised from among the residents and armed with single-shot rifles of old pattern the place was undefended.

It was only a matter of days, perhaps hours, before Tientsin, like Pekin, would also be infested by hordes of fanatical Chinese, drunk with the lust for blood and destruction. The result was a foregone conclusion. The Chinese Imperial troops would cast in their lot with the rebels, and sheer numbers would overpower the slender defence and sweep into the European quarter in an irresistible avalanche.

Digitized by Google

Quarter or mercy there would be none. People remembered the massacre of Cawnpore. Every surviving man, every woman and child, would be butchered, and the smoke of burning buildings would ascend to heaven like the smoke of a funeral pyre.

Events had marched rapidly. Except for a British and an Indian native battalion at Hong-Kong, and a Chinese regiment under British officers at Wei-hai-wei, there were no British reinforcements immediately available. There were Russian soldiers in Manchuria and at Port Arthur, French in Tonkin, and many troops in Japan; but days must necessarily elapse before they could appear upon the scene, and by that time the worst might have happened. An immediate expedition was necessary if thousands of Europeans were to be saved from a ghastly holocaust and European prestige were to be preserved.

It was lucky that for some time past a fleet of men-of-war representing all the European nationalities and Japan had gradually been assembling off Taku as close as their draught would permit to the shallow bar of the Pei-ho River.

From their fighting-tops and upper bridges the dun-coloured mounds which represented the powerful Taku forts were faintly visible twelve miles away on the rim of the horizon. Forty-one years before those selfsame forts had been unsuccessfully attacked by British gunboats under Admiral Sir James Hope. A year later, in August, 1860, they had fallen to a combined attack from the shore on the part of the British and French. But by 1900 the forts had been rebuilt and remodelled by European military engineers, and were crammed with Chinese soldiery and heavily armed with modern Krupp guns, one hundred and twenty of them.

Some of the smaller ships—gunboats, sloops, and a couple of British destroyers—passed in and out over the shallow bar of the river engaged upon their business, or lay in the stream itself with steam up, guns cleared

Digitized by Google

away, and slips on their cables—ready for immediate action.

And day after day, hour after hour, the men in those small vessels watched the muzzles of the Krupp guns in the forts frowning over their yellow glacis, saw the Chinese sentries pacing the parapets, heard the dull throbbing of Chinese drums and the shrill screeching of the bugles. It was a period of strain and tension, for, well served, those guns could have blown the allied inshore flotilla to pieces in a few minutes. Everything depended upon what happened in the interior. At any moment telegraphic orders might arrive from Pekin and the guns in the forts might burst into flame.

Affairs grew from bad to worse. On June 10th an international force of about two thousand seamen and marines, nearly half of whom were British, disembarked from the fleet off Taku with the intention of proceeding to Pekin by rail to reinforce the Legation guards. The expedition was under the personal command of Vice-Admiral Sir Edward Seymour, the British Naval Commander-in-chief, himself a veteran of the China War of 1860. Further men were also landed to garrison Tientsin.

It is not intended here to describe in detail the progress and the fierce fighting of the Boxer campaign. This narrative concerns the doings of one Michael Bray, Midshipman, R.N., who, at the age of sixteen, found himself serving ashore with a naval brigade in one of those little side-shows which have occurred so often in the history of the British Navy.

The fighting was none the less fierce because in the light of greater and more recent wars, it has long since been forgotten save by those who took part in it. Moreover, the South African War, in progress at the time, absorbed the attention of everybody at home in England. China, in spite of the interests at stake there, was somewhere off the map and purely secondary. Indeed, the average man in the street could hardly have pointed straight to the remote and mysterious city of Pekin,

Digitized by Google

whence all the trouble emanated, much less have described what all the " bobbery " was about.

On June 16th the " Boreas," then at Hong-Kong, received sudden orders to embark portion of a British battalion and to proceed to Taku with all dispatch. The passage was an exciting one, for every one on board realized that fighting was possible, and the small-arm companies of seamen were organized and served out with rifles and bayonets, ammunition, equipment, waterproof sheets, and new boots, so as to be ready, if need be, for immediate service ashore. The marines, looking very warlike, paraded in khaki, obtained at Hong-Kong, and wearing their heavy marching order. Grindstones were hard at work putting cutting edges on cutlasses, the officers' swords, and bayonets, and those of the snotties who possessed private revolvers spent many happy hours burnishing them up. It was a delightful prospect to have something less innocent to fire at than an empty bottle flung into the sea.

Several long twelve-pounders, ship guns, had been obtained at Hong-Kong with the necessary ammunition, and were fitted on board with extemporized wooden carriages and wheels. The efficacy of these weapons had already been proved in South Africa, and though the most modern vessels in the navy were supplied with a short-range, light twelve-pounder with a wheeled carriage for use as a field gun, the greater number of ships in China were still provided for landing purposes with the ancient nine-pounder, in which charge and studded projectile had to be rammed in through the muzzle after the fashion of a bygone age. These guns, however gallantly served, would be wholly useless against the up-to-date field artillery of the Chinese, which included some four-inch Krupp field guns.

It was before the days of wireless, and on June 20th the ship was flung into a ferment of excitement by meeting the dispatch vessel " Alacrity," who imparted the information that the Taku forts had been stormed and

Digitized by Google

captured by the allies three days before. British bluejackets and marines and the small craft in the river had borne the brunt of the fighting. Four Chinese destroyers had been cut out and captured at their moorings by two British destroyers. It was joyful, inspiriting news, though it must be confessed that the men of the "Boreas" were not a little jealous at not having been present.

At daybreak on June 21st the ship joined the fleet off Taku, and the troops were immediately disembarked into destroyers, tugs, and lighters which took them ashore.

From the tenor of the signals that were constantly being made and the numbers of boats with senior officers on board that passed to and fro between the various ships, it was easy to see that something important and unusual was in the wind. But the captain, when he came back from his official visit to the British rear-admiral, who was left in charge at Taku during the absence of the commander-in-chief with the expeditionary force ashore, arrived on board again with an angry glint in his eye and a face like a veritable thundercloud.

Michael happened to be midshipman of the watch on the quarter-deck when he returned, and heard part of a conversation with the commander as the latter followed the captain aft to his cabin.

"Things are about as bad as they possibly can be," the skipper growled, shrugging his shoulders. "No," he added, in answer to a question, "our men and guns aren't wanted. We sail for Chifu. . . ." The rest was inaudible.

And presently news began to filter through the ship from various sources—the signalmen, the captain's valet, his clerk, the coxswain of his galley, and other folk who had heard tit-bits of information and pieced together some sort of a story. Some of the yarns were rather exaggerated; but in the main they were tolerably correct.

Sir Edward Seymour and his column had never reached the capital, for the railway line had been torn up in front

Digitized by Google

of them and they found themselves opposed by masses of regular Chinese troops and Boxers. There had been severe and continuous fighting, and the expedition had been driven back by sheer weight of numbers. But nothing had been heard of them for days. Their ammunition could not last for ever, and expecting a simple journey by rail they had taken with them food for seven days and the smallest supply of medical and surgical necessities. They had been ashore for fifteen days and had had heavy fighting!

The country was in a blaze of armed opposition. No less than seventy thousand Chinese, of whom two-thirds were regular troops under Prince Ching and notorious anti-foreign leaders, such as Prince Tuan and General Nieh, were said to be massed in the country round about Pekin and Tientsin. They were constantly being reinforced by hordes of Boxers, whose numbers might be estimated at anything between fifty and one hundred thousand.

And in the midst of these masses had disappeared a British admiral and his force of two thousand men. Perhaps they were still fighting for their lives—equally possible that the worst had occurred and that the expedition had been overwhelmed and every one of its members massacred.

Pekin was completely isolated. Tientsin, garrisoned by seamen and marines from the fleet, was besieged by the enemy and heavily bombarded with modern artillery against which there was no adequate reply. The fate of the populations of both places trembled in the balance. Even now they might have fallen into the hands of a barbarous and fanatical enemy to suffer torture and death which it were better not to describe.

And in spite of the situation the " Boreas's " four long twelve-pounders, her three hundred odd blue jackets with rifles, and her sixty marines, all ready for immediate landing, were not required!

Those in authority had decided against it. The ship

Digitized by Google

was to sail for Chifu within forty-eight hours lest trouble should occur there.

There was possibly some very good reason for the decision; but it was gall and wormwood to officers and men condemned to bitter inactivity while their squadron mates were fighting ashore. And as after events amply proved the decision was not a good one. Both guns and men would have been invaluable in Tientsin—particularly the guns.

Everybody was miserable. The captain and commander went about with gloomy faces, and damned everybody and everything with impartial fervour. Challoner, who had confidently expected to land with his beloved guns, retired to his cabin and became as surly as a bear, consigning all and sundry who knocked at his door to the nether regions. The other lieutenants, many of whom had sharpened their swords and made other warlike preparations, and the surgeon, or "Young Doc," to give him his wardroom nickname, who had whetted his instruments for a more grisly purpose still, became apathetic and listless, hardly caring what happened. Even "Holy Joe," the chaplain, was heard to mutter a wicked word in the smoking-room when somebody inadvertently slopped a glass of sherry over the sleeve of his clean white tunic. In the gunroom vituperance against those set in authority reigned supreme, and mutinous language was at a premium.

The men, too, gathering in disgruntled groups as they smoked their pipes during the dinner-hour, cursed the bitter luck which denied them the chance they longed for.

But the disappointment, so far as Michael and some of the others were concerned, did not last for very long, for towards evening Captain Kilpatrick was summoned hastily on board the flagship, whence he returned in half an hour in a more cheerful frame of mind.

The commander and first lieutenant met him at the top of the gangway.

"Better news," said the skipper, returning the

Digitized by Google

salutes. "There are no jobs ashore for you and I, commander, though I importuned the admiral for all I was worth. But we're to land all the marines, one company of seamen, and one twelve-pounder with its crew and ammunition at daylight to-morrow. You, first-lieutenant," he added to Challoner, "will go in charge of the gun and seamen. Also the two marine officers, of course, and the lieutenant and midshipmen of whichever company you select—I leave that to you, commander."

"Thank the Lord, sir!" "Number One" murmured, beaming all over his face.

The midshipman of the watch, having overheard portions of the conversation, incontinently deserted his place of duty on the quarter-deck and darted below to the gunroom to impart the joyful news.

"Shake up, you ugly blighters!" he shouted, dashing aside the curtains and rushing into the mess.

"Oh, go to blazes!" observed a sleepy gentleman stretched out on a settee under the scuttles where it was fairly cold. "Why the dickens——"

"We're landing one gun, a company of seamen, and all the Gerines[1] at daylight to-morrow!" the youth exclaimed excitedly. "I've just heard the skipper telling the commander and Number One!"

Everybody woke up and questions were hurled at him.

"What officers are going?"

"Which snotties?"

"Which company's told off, you silly fathead?"

"I don't know. Don't believe it's decided," answered the messenger.

"I'll bet I shan't get ashore," said one of the junior midshipmen mournfully. "I never have any luck. I'd give a fiver to go, or at least I would if I could borrow it."

A senior snotty promptly sat on his head for impertinence.

"I call it deuced unfair if they land junior snotties,

[1] "Gerines," i.e. the Royal Marines.

Digitized by Google

anyhow!" shouted another young gentleman of over eighteen, who, since he enjoyed a "fat time" as navigator's assistant, where he kept no regular watch, ran no boats, and did no divisional work with the men, saw no prospect whatsoever of being landed. "What's the good of landing inexperienced junior snotties who haven't been a dog-watch at sea? Devilishly unfair, I call it. The senior snotties ought to draw lots as to who goes."

"Oh, confound you, Carruthers!" Hartopp flung back. "You make me tired. Why shouldn't the warts have their chance with the others?"

"I don't give a twopenny damn what you think, anyhow!" Carruthers retorted with heat. "We all know how you pet your favourites!"

Hartopp glared at the insult. The junior snotties held their breath in anticipation. There were the makings of a pretty little gunroom argument with much personal abuse, followed very possibly by a fight. Nothing would have pleased them more than to see the unpopular Carruthers soundly trounced by Hartopp.

"Say that again, you swine!" Hartopp exclaimed with a face of wrath, springing up from his chair and starting to unbutton his white tunic in readiness for active operations. "Everybody knows you're a useless skrimshanking ullage! Say it——"

His bellicose intentions were interrupted by a knock on the door. The commander's messenger poked his head in through the curtain.

"Mister 'Artopp and Mister Bray, sir?"

"Hullo!" they both answered.

"Commander wants you both in 'is cabin at once, sir, please."

"D'you know what it's about?" the senior snotty asked, forgetting his feud.

"E's got the first lootenant in there with 'im, sir," said the ordinary seaman with an air of mystery. "I 'eard a buzz, sir, that 'A' company was goin' to be landed first thing to-morrow mornin'."

Digitized by Google

He omitted to state that he had heard the "buzz" by standing very close to one of the open scuttles of the commander's upper-deck cabin while affairs of State were being discussed within.

"Hoo-blooming-ray!" shouted Hartopp, knocking over a deck-chair in his excitement and rushing off. "Come on, Bray! Get a move on!"

Michael needed no encouragement. Having retrieved his cap from behind the beer barrel he followed close on Hartopp's heels.

"Oh, you lucky devils!" groaned the others in a chorus of envy. "Hartopp, you blighter, mind you put in a good word for us!"

It was true. "A" company, the forecastlemen, were to land, and Hartopp and Michael, as the proper midshipmen of the division, were to go with it. The commander and first-lieutenant had settled it between them by the simple process of drawing lots.

Michael spent a sleepless night tossing about in his hammock. There were so many things rushing about in his mind.

Active service ashore!

How did one behave, and what would it feel like to be under fire? He knew for a certainty that he would be horribly frightened when the bullets began to fly, and the tales he had heard of the Chinese atrocities on the wounded and the prisoners were rather unpleasant.

Otherwise the prospect was rather thrilling. The short letters he wrote to his father and to Diana early the next morning before landing certainly betrayed no traces of nervousness. They were full of exultation —exultation in his good luck at having been chosen.

Digitized by Google

They scattered us across the seas
And bandied us from shore to shore,
And killed a few—in twos and threes—
And wept, and sent a dozen more.
Oh, Lord! They've plenty more!

The ties, the friends, the life at home,
The other things we might have been,
The songs of Greece, the lays of Rome,
Were clean forgot at seventeen.
Oh, Lord! At seventeen!

But we can dance and see the fun,
And wonder at the sea and sky,
And train and lay a six-inch gun,
And laugh and work and fight and die.
Ah, Lord! All men must die!

—From "A Gunroom Ditty Box"
by G. Stewart Bowles

MICHAEL, prone on his stomach on the sun-baked ground with a rifle and open packet of cartridges beside him, raised himself on his elbows and cautiously removed an empty corned beef tin from the loophole in the low breastwork of bales and sandbags before putting his eye to the opening.

He was engaged in the congenial occupation of sniping, and the tin served a useful purpose. The Chinese trench, with its low parapet, was barely a hundred yards distant, and the enemy riflemen were unduly active. Some of them were good shots, and so conspicuous an object as a loophole darkened occasionally by a human head behind the protruding muzzle of a rifle inevitably drew

Digitized by Google

their fire. Indeed, one bluejacket, neglecting the simple precaution, had been killed barely twenty minutes before—shot cleanly through the forehead.

And throughout the morning bullet after bullet had thudded unpleasantly close into the sandbags, or, ricocheting off the hard ground, sailed off into space with a dismal wailing sound terrifying in its eeriness. It was a little nerve-racking to know that all this nickel and lead was hurtling within a few feet and inches of one's head, and that any flying sliver might kill.

For two days the Chinese had been making determined attempts to capture the railway station at Tientsin, which, if it once fell into their hands, would make the position of the forces defending the settlements on the opposite bank of the river doubly precarious. The station was garrisoned by the British, and reinforcements of bluejackets and marines had been hurried thither the evening before just in time to beat off a heavy attack after sundown, in which the enemy, rushing the defences, actually got in among the buildings and railway trucks, some of them with tins of kerosene wherewith to set the place on fire.

The Chinese were stirred up by a fanatical courage, and there had been desperate fighting in and about the medley of buildings, trucks, and railway lines before they were finally dislodged, leaving many dead and wounded behind them. It had been a severe tussle with bayonets, cutlasses and revolvers, for the fighting was so confused that rifle fire on both sides, since it was as dangerous to friend as to foe, died away as if by tacit agreement.

The night, save for the customary sniping and intermittent bursts of rifle and machine-gun fire at anything seen moving, had been fairly quiet; but nobody in the British defences had slept. The construction of regular trenches was impossible, since the ground was like asphalt and entrenching tools were unprocurable in any quantity, so during the darkness of a moonless

Digitized by Google

night the defenders had busied themselves in strengthening the position by building up and thickening the breastworks with bales of cotton and silk filched from warehouses, bags of rice and maize—anything and everything that would serve to stop a bullet.

Even the ladies in Tientsin had been called upon to help by providing sandbags, and, through want of more suitable materials, linen, cotton, flowered chintzes, coloured silks, even *crêpe de Chine*, had been pressed into service and fashioned hurriedly into shape by a hundred busy fingers and sewing-machines. It was a little incongruous to see a prettily patterned cretonne, suitable for chair covers in a lavender-scented English drawing-room, doing duty in the first-line defences of a beleagured town in North China and stained black with the blood of a killed or wounded man.

Before dawn the enemy's Krupp guns started their usual bombardment of the concessions and railway station, a bombardment to which there was no adequate reply save from the "Boreas's" solitary long-range twelve-pounder in its gunpit on the mud wall behind the European settlement. It had made excellent shooting, seriously annoying the Chinese; but ammunition was precious and had to be husbanded.

Half a dozen such guns and mountains of ammunition might possibly have sufficed to keep down the hostile fire. Three more guns were actually on their way to the front; but those in authority at Taku could have had little conception of the real state of affairs up country, or they would have been sent long before. The gallantly served nine-pounder muzzle-loaders on their field carriages, brought into action at comparatively short range, had been almost useless—mere death-traps. Time and time again their crews had been killed and wounded by heavy rifle fire.

The Chinese segment shell, bursting on impact or in the air like shrapnel, had that morning occasioned a few more casualties and fires and had damaged a few

Digitized by Google

more buildings in the already battered settlements. The engine-house at the railway station, a conspicuous building just behind the British lines, looked like a huge colander with its walls and roof all pockmarked with bullets, perforated and scarred by shell fire.

Inhabitants and defenders alike had long since become accustomed to the whistling of bullets in the streets, the whinnying screech of projectiles overhead, the crashing of bricks as they drove home and burst, or the metallic clang as they exploded in mid-air. They were used to jagged fragments of steel raining down from above to raise spouts of dust from the neat roadways, to whip the bark and foliage from the trees and maybe to kill or wound a person or two.

The smoke-puffs of exploding shell, white and bulbous like huge cauliflowers against the intense blue of the sky until slowly dissipated by the breeze, had burst spasmodically in and out, in and out, for days on end. The place was virtually in a state of siege, despite its nominal relief some time before, for the railway line to Taku was torn up and the settlement was invested on three sides by the Chinese within easy rifle range. The narrow, tortuous Pei-ho River alone afforded communication with the coast; but even so the tugs and lighters using it to bring up the much-needed reinforcements and stores and ammunition were subjected to heavy rifle fire from the enemy concealed in the reeds and undergrowth on the banks.

At the railway station, shortly before daylight, when the weary, gaunt-eyed seamen and marines—dirty, unshaven, their uniforms torn and stained—stood to arms after a hasty meal of semi-liquid corned beef and hard ship's biscuit washed down with cocoa brewed well behind the lines under cover, a Chinese attack had been launched.

Encouraged by the frenzied beating of drums, the banging of cymbals, and the hoarse screeching of bugles, a horde of howling, yellow-skinned devils, brandishing weapons, swarmed into view over their parapet and

Digitized by Google

rushed forward to the assault, spurred on by their officers. They were not wanting in courage.

Some wore the fantastic blue, red, and black jumpers of the Imperial Chinese Army with white discs bearing hieroglyphics denoting regiments and numbers on breast and back, and blue, baggy trousers thrust into the tops of black stuff ankle boots with thick white soles. Others were dressed in the ordinary blue garb of coolies adorned with red sashes, which showed they were professed Boxers. Some—the greater number—carried Mauser rifles with fixed bayonets; others, Sniders and flintlocks with long triangular bayonets; still more, heavy iron swords and rusty, antiquated tridents filched from some armoury and more suited to ceremonial purposes than for real warfare. Here and there couples of men could be seen staggering forward with "gingals," or large, two-man guns, either breech or muzzle loading.

But they were determined in their onslaught and by no means to be despised. They outnumbered the defenders by more than six to one; and led by their officers with Mauser pistols and waving swords, they came on bravely enough, a wave of demoniacal-looking men with their huge triangular banners of red and black and yellow with scalloped fringes fluttering in their midst. They were a mob, not even a disciplined mob; but because of the sheer disparity of numbers their onset was fraught with danger.

They had about a hundred yards to cover before reaching the British trench. Magazine fire was poured upon them until they went down in kicking, writhing heaps. Maxims sprayed them with bullets and cut swaths in their ranks—but still the remainder came on with fanatical bravery, yelling horribly, firing from the hip as they advanced at a shambling jog-trot.

They seemed inexhaustible, a multitude, for the more men that were shot down the more seemed to rise up in their place. The barrels of the defenders' rifles grew hot with the incessant magazine fire.

Digitized by Google

If once the enemy poured into the British defences and overwhelmed them there would be no quarter. It would be a fight to the death—even the wounded on the ground would be hewn in pieces with those blunt iron swords. The British, indeed, were advised to shoot themselves rather than let themselves fall alive into the enemy's hands, and there were positive orders to the effect that Chinese wounded, since they were apt to shoot or to stab in the back, were invariably to be dispatched without mercy. There were none of the niceties of war here. It was rumoured that arrangements had even been made for the shooting of all European women and girls in Tientsin in the event of the Chinese capturing the place, rather than that they should fall alive into the hands of an enemy to suffer unspeakable outrage followed by awful mutilation. The thought of defenceless women in the hands of a bestial Chinese mob drunk with blood was too horrible to be contemplated. What had occurred in outlying districts to the wives and daughters of missionaries, and the female converts, was ever uppermost in men's minds.

And that attack on the railway station, which was only one of many, came near to success, for seamen and marines, shoulder to shoulder behind their low breastwork, had been forced to receive the enemy with the bayonet.

It had been sharp, ghastly work, a horrible mêlée of struggling men—jabbing, bloodstained bayonets flashing in the morning sun and driving relentlessly home; cutlasses rising, falling, and rising again, crimsoned; revolvers snapping; officers shouting orders, men cursing and snarling like wolves, wounded moaning; men seizing each other by the throat and striving to gouge each other's eyes out, smashing at each other's heads with rifle butts. Everywhere those horrible yellow faces with their devilish slanting eyes. The loathsome reek of their heated bodies. . . .

In places the attack had penetrated the line, for

Digitized by Google

numerous gaudy corpses lay well to the rear of the British breastwork where they had been shot or bayoneted. In front the ground was a shambles, littered with dead. They lay singly and in thick bunches, just as rifle and maxim bullet had sought them out, the blood from their wounds darkening the sandy ground in hideous patches. A man, horribly wounded by a bayonet thrust through the body, had wriggled and moaned in his agony a few feet from Michael's loophole until a merciful bullet quietened him for ever.

Some of the dead had been there for days, and were now little better than withered skeletons. The air was thick with rifles, and the hot sun, brazen in the noonday sky, rapidly did its work. Within a few hours corpses became distended, loathsome and horrible to look upon. The nauseating stench of putrefaction hung heavily in the air, and the gaunt dogs from deserted villages, fierce and emaciated, reverted readily to their lupine habits and prowled about in packs seeking what they might devour. They attacked the wounded, and reaped a rich harvest among the slain, wrangling noisily.

Three short weeks before, Michael had never seen a dead man—nothing more gruesome than a defunct horse wobbling horribly in a cart on its way to a knacker's yard. Now he had seen dead men in their dozens, their twenties and their fifties—Chinese dead neatly killed by bullet or by bayonet; the corpses of native Christians, many of them women, slaughtered by their own countrymen and lying stark in the open, hideously gashed and mutilated; the bodies of British seamen and marines, men whom he had known by name and had spoken to in the "Boreas"; wounded men lying in agony in the intense heat with flies black upon their injuries, and calling piteously for water—always water.

When, dusty, hot, footsore, and incredibly tired and filthy after a long forced march and considerable fighting, they had entered the concessions at Tientsin on its first relief, to be greeted with tears of joy by the women and

Digitized by Google

the cheers of the depleted garrison, the Pei-ho River, upstream of a bridge of boats over which they passed, lay packed for yards with a tightly jambed mass of corpses, the result of a wholesale massacre of native Christians in the Chinese city. They were there literally in their hundreds, defiling the air, altogether horrible. Tortured by the blazing heat of the North China summer, and in spite of the strictest orders to the contrary, it was this same polluted water with which the men sometimes filled their water bottles. Pocket filters were unobtainable in any quantity, and though occasionally they took the precaution of boiling it, more often they did not. Thirsty men with empty bottles would not be denied, and the water-carts with distilled water were sometimes a long time in coming, if they came at all.

Michael had been one of the expedition which relieved the admiral and his column, which, after their abortive attempt to reach Pekin, had fought their way back and had eventually captured Hsi-ku arsenal some few miles from the native city of Tientsin.

He had heard at first hand the full tale of their sufferings and heavy casualties, had learned of wounded being butchered by the enemy, had seen the haggard, bearded officers and men emaciated and weak with dysentery after a diet of little but coolie rice and raw vegetables torn from the ground.

He had seen horrible wounds swathed in filthy, blood-stained bandages, or rags and portions of clothing and pugarees of helmets used as such. He had seen maimed men, some of whom would never walk properly again, hobbling painfully about with discarded rifles as crutches, and, with others, had heard the rumour that some of the more badly wounded had had to be left behind for lack of transport; but that they had been put out of their agony by their friends in preference to falling alive into the hands of the enemy. The report was probably exaggerated; but it had its effect.

And sometimes he wondered vaguely what Diana would

Digitized by Google

have thought of it all, and whether she, a girl, would have become hardened and callous to horrors like himself.

There were girls of her own age in Tientsin, and one, with rippling hair rather like Diana's and soft grey eyes, had carried him off in innocent triumph to her home and her mother to be fed and cared for when first he had entered Tientsin with the relief force.

It was a treat to be in a civilized house again, and he was as hungry as a vulture. And while he ate an enormous meal she solemnly sat there with her eyes wide open asking questions, innumerable questions—just the sort of questions that Diana would have asked. Rather to his horror, for it was fully loaded, she fingered his heavy service revolver and squirmed in awed horror as she gazed at the two scratches on the butt which indicated two " kills." Also she drew from its scabbard the broad blade of a cutlass nearly as big as Michael himself. And Michael, the bloodthirsty little wretch, felt a vague pang of regret that it was not stained with gore. That was to come later.

Afterwards she had made him a black cover for the khaki-painted sailor's straw hat that he wore. Other people had found them useful, she explained, for straw hats were dreadfully conspicuous to the enemy on moonlight nights.

She was altogether an immensely practical young woman, self-possessed and very pretty. Her name was Henrietta, nickname " Mumps," which Michael might call her if he cared to. She had a brother a year older than herself at school in England, and Daddy, Michael gathered, had something or other to do with one of the large export firms, but was then away in Shanghai and had not been able to return before the crisis. Judging from his large, well-ordered house and garden he was evidently a man of substance. The Chinese boys, however, had all fled at the first signs of trouble, and Michael was shown where a shell had burst on the roof of the

Digitized by Google

kitchen, built out at the back of the house, considerably to its detriment.

He liked Henrietta and her mother, for they were pleasant, kind people, genuinely pleased to see him. They asked him to come again, to come as often as he liked, and to bring his friends. And, considerably to his confusion, both mother and daughter had kissed him when he left, because in some mysterious way he reminded them of their Bob at home in England.

Michael liked the soft touch of Henrietta's lips on his. It was ages since any woman or girl had taken sufficient interest in him to want to kiss him, and sometimes he had felt a little starved, as if he wanted petting. But in his innermost heart he felt he was being a little unfaithful to Diana in appreciating the kiss of a comparative stranger, however attractive she might be.

Afterwards he wondered to himself who would have the awful task of shooting Henrietta if the Chinese got into the settlement. He hoped earnestly it would not be him, though perhaps snotties were excused from such horrors on the score of their youth. He could not imagine Henrietta dead with a blackened bullet hole in that pretty forehead of hers just where the hair curled off her temples.

War was hideous and so utterly senseless. It was all blood, filth, hunger, thirst, desolation—utter beastliness. In the stress of the fighting men became callous to pain and suffering, almost devoid of feeling, abnormal, unthinking, cruel in their outlook upon life—barely civilized. And Michael, though merely a child in years, was no exception to the rule. He also had changed and hardened.

Reinforcements for the garrison of Tientsin gradually arrived—Russian rifle regiments from Siberia in white blouses, flat, peaked caps worn aslant, baggy black trousers thrust into the tops of knee-boots of soft leather, and long, triangular bayonets eternally fixed on the muzzles of their rifles. Then the French battalions from Tonkin in blue dungaree uniform; sturdy little dark

Digitized by Google

skinned soldiers from Japan in blue tunics and white trousers with peculiar pork-pie shaped caps with vividly coloured bands; an Austrian contingent; a small Italian naval brigade; khaki-clad American infantry straight from the Philippines; and German marines from Tsingtau.

The last-named, determined to create an impression, arrived in the newest of new khaki and peculiar straw hats turned up at the side and ornamented with rosettes of their national colours, and pranced into the settlement in a goose-step with their band blaring. Their red-faced, perspiring officers, wearing monocles, and stiff linen collars under their tight tunics, pranced gaily with them, their swords drawn.

They certainly created an impression, though not quite the kind they wished, for the British seamen, dirty, tired, and unkempt after much fighting, turned out in force from the warehouses which served them as barracks to watch them go by, and had difficulty in concealing their merriment.

"'S trewth," someone murmured, chuckling, "'ere comes a bloomin' circus and them's the hacrobats! Wonder what they've done with the elephant and giraffe?"

"And look at their bleedin' 'ats, George!" said another man, gazing in wonderment. "Gor blimey, ain't they sweatin' 'orrid! Come 'ere to fight the Chinks, 'ave they, or to look pretty?"

It was a great experience to see and to meet the troops of all these foreign nations, to watch them at drill and to size them up; but Michael, after seeing them in action once or twice, conceived the greatest admiration of all for the hardy Japanese. They were born fighters, plucky to a fault.

The most welcome reinforcements of all, however, were three more long twelve-pounders with their crews from the "Boreas," for guns to keep down the heavy fire of a Chinese six-inch and numerous forty-pounder Krupps were even more important than men.

Digitized by Google

The new weapons were speedily installed in gunpits protected by sandbags, and before long were hammering lustily away at the hostile guns in the native city and elsewhere. It was satisfactory to realize that at last the Chinese were being repaid in their own coin, and during the height of the bombardment it was no rare occurrence for a single British gun to fire as many as two hundred shell a day. Some of the European merchants, with an eye to future trade, strenuously protested against what they considered this "wanton bombardment" and destruction of valuable property; but luckily without avail. For the time military considerations and the silencing of the enemy artillery more than outweighed the importance of future commercial prosperity.

Michael spent most of his days and nights with one of the twelve-pounders mounted on the mud wall not far from the settlements. It was strenuous, exciting work, for the guns were within two miles of the native city, and scarcely half that distance from an arsenal filled with Chinese troops. Hardly an hour passed without incident.

Chinese snipers concealed in ruined villages within half a mile fired incessantly on any men showing themselves in the gunpits until the guns' crews, annoyed at their persistency, turned out with their rifles and dislodged them at the point of the bayonet.

Mosquitoes were prevalent, and rain sometimes came down in torrents, until the gunpits were flooded as high as the men's knees and the gun carriages all but disappeared in the mud. Night alarms, real or imaginary, were frequent, and once the entire force stood hurriedly to arms because the bluejacket sentry discharged his rifle at "approaching Chinese cavalry"—which subsequently proved to be nothing more dangerous than a group of Japanese ammunition ponies tethered near the guns. And sentry after sentry declared on his most solemn word that a Chinese officer on an enormous white horse was in the habit of appearing regularly at midnight and standing quite motionless near the guns before melting

Digitized by Google

away in thin air. Ordinary Chinamen they weren't afraid of, said the men; but ghostly Chinamen they couldn't abide, so one night the sentries were doubled. A splutter of rifle fire in the early hours heralded the approach of the apparition, which incontinently vanished. The next morning, however, revealed a pile of newly turned earth, which showed the final resting-place of a large white goat of the female persuasion which had been adopted as a pet by a French battalion encamped nearby!

Sometimes, in the daytime, Chinese troops and Boxers appeared in force on the plain away to the left and formed up, with drums and cymbals beating and banners fluttering in their midst, as if to attack, whereupon the guns were slewed round and saluted them with common shell and shrapnel and caused them to disperse. On one glorious morning, too, the pagoda in the native city which served as an observation tower for the enemy's guns, was struck fair and square in the middle by a twelve-pounder shell, to vanish, with the gentleman on top of it, in a cloud of smoke and dust.

But the British guns were systematically fired upon from three sides—right, left, and front—and this retaliatory bombardment was both dangerous and irksome. The Chinese lobbed shell after shell into the sandbag emplacements or burst them neatly overhead, so that casualties in the gunpits were by no means infrequent. All had narrow escapes.

The life was full of discomfort, for fresh water was a precious commodity, too valuable for washing, and unless people bathed in the river or canals, which contained unsavoury mementoes of war, they generally went unwashed. The heat was intolerable, and it was particularly felt by the seamen and their officers, most of whom were unprovided with khaki and wore their ordinary blue clothing. Men soon became a nuisance to themselves and an abomination to their friends, as for days on end, due to the constant alarms, they could not remove their clothes. Lice and bugs made their appear-

Digitized by Google

ance. Ordinary mosquito bites turned into hideous, festering sores.

The food, too, was none too palatable. Fresh meat of a sort was served out every third day, and the armed foraging parties sent out a short distance into the country generally returned with sufficient vegetables to provide the entire naval brigade with a daily ration. But for the rest of the time, so far as the sailors were concerned, it was bully beef, semi-liquid and nauseous in the heat, and ship's biscuit. Being on active service a rum ration was served out daily to the officers, as well as to the men. It was the first time Michael had ever tasted spirits; but gulping it down with his supper he found it made him sleep in spite of the heat and the frenzied trumpeting of the mosquitoes in his ears.

The culminating point of the fighting at Tientsin was the capture of the native city on July 13th and 14th. The attacking troops, consisting of eight hundred British —of which three hundred were seamen and marines— together with Americans, Japanese, Russians, French, and a few Austrians, left the settlements under cover of darkness early in the morning of July 13th. Soon after daylight they were in possession of the arsenal covering the approach to the native city to the westward, and the naval guns opened a heavy bombardment on the city walls with the object of keeping down the heavy fire of the hundreds of Chinese riflemen in position thereon.

By eight in the morning several fires had been started in the city, and half an hour later a naval shell found the magazine of a particularly virulent Chinese battery, which blew up with a thundering roar and a towering column of dun-coloured smoke about three thousand feet high.

With a brief intermission in the afternoon, due to an erroneous report that the Japanese had entered the city, the bombardment continued throughout the day. Shells burst constantly along the battlemented city wall; but the Chinese, fighting with all the valour of desperation,

Digitized by Google

most gallantly stuck to their positions and kept up a heavy rifle fire until they were literally swept away, wall and all. And so severe was their fire on the attacking troops advancing along the open roads that the latter were unable to make much progress and incurred severe casualties.

They lay that night in shallow, hastily constructed trenches within, in places, three hundred yards of the Chinese rifles; but at the first gleams of daylight the next morning the bombardment reopened and the troops moved forward to the attack. Soon afterwards came the joyful news that the south gate of the city had been blown down and that the allies were in possession.

It is impossible here to speak of the many deeds of gallantry performed on those two eventful days; but Tientsin city, the final bar to the advance on Pekin for the succour of the beleaguered Legations—the *raison d'être* of the campaign—had been captured. It had cost the attackers eight hundred casualties, the British alone contributing twenty-three killed and fifty-seven wounded. The Chinese losses were prodigious.

Street fighting continued for some time, and for days afterwards troops scouring the neighbouring country were constantly coming across small parties of Chinese troops and Boxers who had fled from Tientsin. Sometimes they put up a feeble defence; more often they surrendered and thought themselves lucky at being brought back as prisoners instead of being shot out of hand.

The scenes in the city itself beggared description. Many of the houses were blazing and corpses littered the streets and battlements. The inhabitants, laden with their belongings in bundles, rickshaws, and carts, streamed out of the place in terror and confusion, fearing a general massacre. It was easy for Chinese troops and Boxers alike to discard their uniforms and distinctive red sashes and to adopt the ordinary blue workaday dress of coolies, so that it was impossible to tell who were ex-combatants and who were not. And with the temporary removal of

Digitized by Google

law and order the predatory instincts of the Chinese asserted themselves. Pawnshops were gutted of their jewels and valuable ornaments; shops of their furs and their silks and satins; treasuries of their stores of bullion and silver "shoes," or sycee, solid lumps of metal each worth some seven pounds ten shillings sterling.

Pillage was in the air, and until it was stopped by rigorous measures even the allied troops joined in it. It was an easy matter to loot a shop of valuable pearls, or jade or gold filigree hair ornaments—easier still to present a bayonet at the breast of a Chinaman dragging a loaded rickshaw and to despoil him of treasures filched from somebody else.

Men came back from the city with their pockets and haversacks stuffed full of gold and silver—one British soldier passing the gunpits laughingly bartered a block of silver worth nearly ten pounds for a small bottle of Japanese chemical beer.

Fabulous were the tales told of fortunes made by individuals. One lucky midshipman was reputed to have in his possession over a thousand pounds' worth of loot, and some of the more senior officers a substantial fortune. There was hardly a soul who hadn't something. It was not until some days later that law and order was once more proclaimed and the looters were forced to disgorge all their booty, which was put into a common fund to be shared out in proper proportions among all the troops engaged.

Michael did not share in the subsequent advance to Pekin and the relief of the Legations, an expedition carried out without much loss or real hardship and with fighting hardly comparable to that which had occurred at Tientsin. The Legations were finally relieved on August 14th, and on September 7th the last of the naval brigades, Michael with them, returned to their ships.

September 8th was Michael's seventeenth birthday, He was still under five feet in height, with smooth cheeks, innocent as yet of any razor. He had left the ship a boy, but returned a man; for in the past ten weeks he had

Digitized by Google

gained a deal of experience, had seen more of life and of death than many people see in a whole lifetime.

His hair was as curly as ever, but the lines of his mouth had hardened a little; for life had taken on a new and more serious aspect. He was sunburned and thin as a rail, and across one knee was a slight scar where a Chinese missile had just grazed the knee-cap. Another bullet had passed through the thick of his upper leg without touching the bone.

Neither had incapacitated him except for a temporary soreness; but he fervently hoped the scars would be permanent. They were not for public inspection; but he was almost as proud of them as the medal which might presently come his way.

Michael Bray — *Chapter XIX*

It was a little difficult to settle down to the humdrum monotony of life on board after the excitement of Tientsin. At first the regular routine of a ship seemed very irksome. It was annoying, for instance, to be turned out of one's hammock daily at 6.15 for physical drill on the quarter-deck, while the morning "school" with the naval instructor, a sandy-haired little man newly arrived from England, was a perfect penance to snotties who a few weeks ago had been up country with their guns.

The naval instructor, though clever and honestly anxious to do his best for the turbulent mob committed to his charge, was young and rather innocent. The "Boreas" was his first ship, and the snotties, it is to be feared, took full advantage of his ignorance of the Service, often absenting themselves from instruction for an hour or more at a stretch on the plea that their boats had been called away, or that they were required by their divisional officers to muster sailors' kits. There were many ingenious excuses for absence, and not many of

Digitized by Google

them were genuine. A few—very few—of the midshipmen were really hardworking. A smaller proportion were clever; but the progress of by far the greater number in their theoretical work was not what it should have been.

The naval instructor, however, was not quite so simple as he looked and soon tumbled to the situation. Accordingly he went to the commander and between them they invented a remedy.

"Young gentlemen," said that potentate, addressing the midshipmen fallen in on deck, "it has come to my ears that some of you are lazy young devils. Some may be diligent; but most of you are idle ruffians. A naval instructor is not sent here for your amusement. He is here to teach; and at my request, and at great trouble to himself, he has kindly consented to start voluntary school in the evenings after dinner between half-past eight and half-past nine." He paused.

None of his hearers evinced much emotion. If the instruction were voluntary, attendance would mainly be confined to an occasional junior snotty to start with, and would dwindle to nobody at all in a week or two. But they were to suffer a rude shock.

"I want you all to volunteer," the commander went on, his eye twinkling as he noticed the wry faces of the young gentlemen. "Those who don't work must be made to work, so all who do not volunteer to attend this extra school will be compelled to do so. I do not wish to have to resort to drastic measures to enforce obedience," he continued, "but if necessary I shall not hesitate to do so. It will rest with the naval instructor to excuse those young officers who really exert themselves and try to learn something."

Loud were the lamentations at the subsequent indignation meeting in the gunroom, for after dinner, as a rule, the snotties were free to do what they liked.

"Sneaking little tizzy-snatcher!" growled the unfortunates. "Fancy taking our threepences a day and then running us in to the commander!"

Digitized by Google

It was an outrage against Service tradition and custom, an unlawful and unjustifiable interference with the liberty of the subject, an insult to their intelligence. But objections and protests alike were without avail, and the snotties profited greatly by the extra work, though they realized it not.

For a couple of months the ship remained at Wei-hai-wei in North China, where, handicapped though they were by their usual condition of penury, the inmates of the gunroom managed to have a tolerably good time. The weather, though hot compared with an English summer, was perfect, and the hotels on the island and mainland were filled with summer visitors who came north to escape the heat of Shanghai and Hong-Kong. There were dances, gymkhanas, and bathing picnics for those who cared for these frivolities; tennis, and cricket on the matting pitch on the gravel recreation ground opposite the ship, and plenty of snipe and hare to be shot on the mainland if one possessed a gun and could get a day's leave. Cartridges were rather a difficulty, for they were hard to obtain on the spot and very expensive. It was not until people took to ordering them to be sent out by their outfitters in England, which meant they appeared in the bill eventually presented to a not overjoyed parent or guardian, that the situation became easier.

There was the club ashore, housed in the residence formerly occupied by Admiral Ting, who had commanded the Chinese fleet at Wei-hai-wei and had committed suicide on its capture by the Japanese rather than face the wrath of Pekin and almost inevitable execution, and whose ghost was still said to walk at nights. And at the club even snotties could obtain sustenance, solid and otherwise, by the simple process of signing "chits" redeemable at the end of the month.

The senior officers were very good.

"Doing anything on Saturday, Bray?" one or other of the wardroom officers would ask.

"No, sir."

Digitized by Google

" Good. We're getting up a shooting party. Breakfast early and leave the ship at half-past seven. We're taking lunch and tea, and want three or four guns from the gunroom if we're going to do that bit of marsh properly. The snipe are as thick as flies. Care to come ? "

" Ra-ther, sir ! " said Michael, beaming all over his face. " Thanks awfully, sir."

Those wardroom shooting parties were most enjoyable affairs. They were strenuous, for one walked miles and miles through difficult country, sometimes with indifferent success. But when the snipe were in, it was no rare thing to return with seventy or eighty couple. One hired coolies at ten cents, or about twopence halfpenny, for the entire day to carry the provender and cartridge bags, and " cheesis," or small boys, to do any necessary beating. These latter were content with no remuneration at all beyond a few empty cartridge cases and scraps of food left over from lunch and tea.

The captain's wife, who had followed the ship to China and had a house ashore, was a regular Mother in Israel. She took an interest in the young officers and often gave tennis parties, followed by suppers and impromptu dances, to which she invited the snotties and all the prettiest girls in the place.

The commander, too, got up weekly picnics in the sailing pinnace on Sunday afternoons, which practically every officer off duty attended and to which the gunroom *en bloc* were generally invited as guests. They took tea and supper with them, bathed in the clear warm water, played rounders, pelted each other with seaweed and jelly-fish, and ate prodigious quantities of devilled sardines and tinned " bangers," or sausages, fried over a fire built on the beach. Then, in the afterglow of the wonderful sunset, with the pale stars dappling the fading sky and the riding and scuttle lights of the distant ships in the anchorage showing clearly against the dull background of the island beyond and reflected in long, quiver-

Digitized by Google

ing pathways across the darkening water, they came back to the ship in the cool and calm of the evening mightily pleased with themselves and tugging lustily at the heavy oars as they shouted a chorus. Old "Cargo Bill," the bearded naval reserve lieutenant, who had served most of his time in sailing ships in the mercantile marine and knew every sea chanty there ever was, skittishly beat time with the tiller in the stern-sheets, and sang the solo parts:

> "I thou—ought I hear—rd the boatswain say
> Blow—oh, blow the man down!"

he would bellow, or:

> "Haul the bowline, the fore and main-top bowline,
> Haul the bowline, the bowline HAUL;
> Haul the bowline, the packet she's a-rollin',
> Haul the bowline, the bowline HAUL!"

Life certainly had its compensations.

Early in October the ship was flung into a state of some excitement by the receipt of sudden telegraphic orders to proceed with all dispatch to Shan-hai-kwan, in the Gulf of Pechili, the spot where the great wall of China comes down to the sea, and where the Chinese were still in possession of eight powerful forts. There was a possibility of having to bombard if the Chinese refused to evacuate them, and preparations were made for action and ammunition got up for the guns. But it took the "Boreas" at least eight hours to raise steam, and before she got to sea the orders, much to everybody's disgust and chagrin, were countermanded.

The forts had already been captured, and by a tiny gunboat, well named the "Pigmy."

This little vessel had gaily steamed into the anchorage flaunting her largest ensign and cleared for action with her six little five-inch guns ready to open fire. It was a ticklish situation, for the forts were full of men, and as the "Pigmy" approached, the twitching muzzles of the

Digitized by Google

great Krupps could be seen following her every movement. Had the Chinese opened fire they could have sunk her out of hand. But they doubtless remembered what had occurred at Taku and at Tientsin and at Pekin. They knew better than to fire at the White Ensign, however small the ship that flew it. They did nothing.

The " Pigmy's " commanding officer, a senior lieutenant, anchored his ship and nonchalantly went ashore with a walking stick, an interpreter, and a few men to interview the Chinese general in command. What he said, what arguments and persuasion he used, never transpired; but the fact remains the Chinaman succumbed. The forts were evacuated by their garrisons, and there followed the ludicrous spectacle of a couple of British marines or bluejackets, with enormous White Ensigns or Union Flags, being temporarily installed in each until they could be taken possession of by allied troops.

Probably it is the only case on record where eight well armed forts containing some thousands of troops have surrendered to a British gunboat of under a thousand tons manned by less than five score officers and men. People laughed when they heard of the incident, and what made it all the more amusing was that the " Pigmy " just forestalled a strong Russian expeditionary force which, with all its guns and warlike impedimenta, was coming from Taku by rail to administer the *coup de grâce*. Great was the wrath when they found that all that was necessary had already been done without bloodshed by the insignificant white " bug trap " with the yellow masts and funnel rolling gunwales under out in the anchorage.

The annual " prize firing " took place in October, and thanks to the trouble taken in the gunnery instruction and training by Captain Kilpatrick, himself an old gunnery officer, and Challoner, the gunnery lieutenant, the " Boreas " established a record, obtaining sixty per cent of hits on the target with her 9.2-inch guns and seventy-seven per cent with the six-inch. This was the

Digitized by Google

highest score yet obtained in the navy, the next best ship being some twenty per cent less.

At the time the "Boreas's" performance was considered as nothing less than wonderful, though the target was large, the weather conditions perfect, and the ship steamed along a line of buoys at a known distance from the target. The range, moreover, was under two thousand yards both for the 9.2 and six-inch guns. In 1900 there was no such thing as a long-range target practice carried out in action conditions, no real system of fire-control. The captain of each gun still fired independently at ranges to which the smooth-bore, muzzle-loaders of Nelson's day could have thrown their round shot.

Before returning to Hong-Kong in December the ship spent three weeks at Yokohama, where leave was given to officers and men.

Michael and Johnnie Barker, thanks to an unexpected birthday gift from Michael's father and to what remained of their pay and private allowances, which, together with five shillings a day "field service allowance," had accumulated while they had been ashore at Tientsin, were temporarily affluent, and crammed a good deal into their leave. They saw the snow-clad peak of Fugiyama, the sacred mountain; Kamakura, with its temples and great bronze Buddha; Miyanoshita, with its Fugiya Hotel beloved of Europeans; Lake Hakone; and Tokyo, the capital. Putting up at the best hotels, which charged naval officers no more than four and a half yen, or about nine shillings a day, they turned out what time they liked and thoroughly enjoyed the change and liberty from ship routine. But they returned impoverished and rather exhausted after intensive sightseeing, having ventured nowhere off the beaten track of tourists.

Prowling about the curio shops in the Benten Dori at Yokohama, Michael bought for Diana a pair of gaudy cloisonné vases of the sort expressly made for foreigners, a lacquer box which he might have purchased for two-

Digitized by Google

thirds of the price in London, and a really pretty kimono in grey silk *crêpe*, wonderfully shaded and decorated with storks and purple iris. He wished he could have bought her something more expensive, but his means would not run to the exquisite ivory carvings, the Satsuma china-ware, and the more delicate lacquer, damascene work, and embroideries.

Japan, of which he had heard so much, rather disappointed him. The country itself was beautiful, the purely native towns and villages picturesque and full of colour, and the people quaint and well-mannered; but the scenery on the whole was no better than scenery in some parts of England and Scotland. And in Yokohama and Tokyo, where Western ideas prevailed, it was incongruous to see the effects of "civilization." Some of the men in dark kimonos with fans wore hideous black bowler hats and elastic-sided brown boots with imitation laces down the front. There were strutting, officious little policemen in tight white uniforms and enormous swords, and here and there an ungainly barrack of a building in hideous red brick cheek by jowl with a pretty little native dwelling in dark, unvarnished pine, its windows glazed with oiled paper, sliding, paper-covered panels instead of walls, spotless mats on the floor, and a wonderfully curving roof, the whole looking as if it had been laboriously cut out by hand with a fretsaw and delicately fitted together like a puzzle.

One evening a small party of gunroom officers dined ashore at a hotel in Yokohama, and afterwards Carruthers, one of the senior midshipmen, who, though not actually drunk, had partaken more than he was accustomed to, had a suggestion to make.

"I say, you chaps," he said, "I vote we don't play snooker. I know a place where we can go and see life. What about it?"

The rest of the party, at least two of whom were blissfully ignorant of what he really meant, and thought he intended taking them to some quite innocent place of

Digitized by Google

amusement, readily fell in with the idea. And embarking in rickshaws they were driven off, until, after passing through a gateway where an armed policeman strutted consequentially, they came to a long street brilliantly lit with arc-lamps and lined with what looked like shops.

But they were not ordinary shops.

In their broad windows, protected by wooden grilles, squatted Japanese women in wonderful kimonos and wide embroidered obis, or sashes, with elaborately dressed hair, carmined lips, and heavily powdered faces. Some were fragile-looking, young, and pretty, girls barely out of their teens ; others the reverse. They fanned themselves lazily, smiling at and ogling the passers-by, while some strummed mournful samisens, nibbled sweetmeats, or smoked their tiny pipes containing a pinch of fine, hair-like tobacco. They were on show, herded together like cattle in a market.

Men passed constantly in and out of the doorways, and the narrow footpaths were crowded with dawdling pedestrians—all natives—who paused every now and then in front of one or other of the windows to inspect what was within. And the women, seeing themselves looked at, smiled and beckoned with their heads. Only a few seemed diffident and shy.

It suddenly dawned upon Michael what Carruthers meant when he had talked about " seeing life." This was no innocent place of amusement. These women were members of the oldest profession in the world.

Michael felt himself blushing all over with shame. Thoughts of Diana flashed through his mind. Supposing —only supposing—she knew that such a street as this existed, and that he had been down it ?

" I say, Tubby," he whispered hurriedly in Johnnie Barker's ear, when the rickshaws stopped and they got out, " I vote we go. I don't half care for this."

" Nor do I," Johnnie confessed nervously. " I didn't realize he was going to bring us here. Let's clear out and go back to the hotel."

Digitized by Google

But it was more easily said than done, for having once arrived it was difficult to make the rickshaw coolie understand what they wanted.

"Wanchee go back hotel," Michael kept on saying.

"Why for you no stay here?" came the inevitable reply from the grinning coolie. "Dis ver' good house. Plenty nice gal."

It was beyond the man's simple comprehension that his passenger should wish to return immediately.

"Here we are," said Carruthers, coming up. "Deuced good place this! But what's all the jawbation about?" he went on to ask. "What's the matter?"

"Er—we've changed our minds," Michael explained hesitatingly. "I think——"

"What?" laughed the senior snotty. "D'you mean to say you're not coming in?"

"Yes. We'd rather not, thanks," Michael answered.

"Well, what about you, Barker?"

"Nor me, either," Johnnie answered. "Bray and I think we'll go back to the hotel and play billiards until it's time to catch the late boat."

"Good Lord! D'you mean to say you didn't know where we were coming?" the other demanded, highly amused. "I say, you chaps," he called out to the others, "here are Bray and Barker running away. They are frightened, the poor little dears!"

"No, we're not!" Michael and Johnnie exclaimed.

"Why won't you come in then?"

"Because we'd rather not," Michael said stoutly. "We've never done this sort of thing. We didn't know we were coming here. I'll swear we didn't!"

Carruthers snorted derisively.

"Little innocents!" he laughed contemptuously. "However, I'm not going to be the cause of leading little whipper-snappers like you astray. Trot along, you poor little mothers' angels."

He turned on his heel and joined the others, and together they disappeared within a lighted doorway.

Digitized by Google

Michael and Johnnie spent the rest of the evening playing billiards at the hotel. They were both rather miserable. The incident had come as a shock, for neither of them had thought very much about these things.

They were glad when, a few days later, Hartopp, the senior midshipman, who had not been one of the party but had evidently heard what had occurred, found them together in the school-place drawing charts for their logs.

" I've been wanting to have a yarn with you chaps," he said mysteriously. " You dined ashore with Carruthers and his party the other night."

They knew what was coming. Relations between Hartopp and Carruthers had been strained for some time, for they detested each other. But latterly they had been more frigid to each other than ever.

" I'm not going to preach," the senior snotty went on meaningly, " but take my tip and don't go ashore with Carruthers again. He's a senior snotty, I know ; but he's a damned rotter, and I've just told him so."

Michael and Johnnie were duly grateful.

Michael Bray — *Chapter XX*

THE months flew by. Officers left the ship and new officers joined in their stead.

Challoner, the first-lieutenant, was promoted to commander for his services ashore in North China and went home to England, Wedderburn, the two and a half-striped torpedo lieutenant, taking over the duties of first-lieutenant, and a new gunnery officer, fresh from Whale Island, joining the " Boreas."

Crawshay, the sub-lieutenant, also shipped the two stripes of lieutenant, and soon afterwards left the ship for a gunboat in place of an officer who had been invalided. Nobody was sorry to see the last of him, but " God help the gunboat ! " said the gunroom.

Digitized by Google

The four senior snotties went up for their seamanship examinations within a few months of each other, though only Hartopp, who really deserved it, achieved the coveted "one," or first-class certificate. But they all passed, and immediately shed their midshipmen's patches, shipped the single gold stripes of acting sub-lieutenants, and became great and magnificent personages indeed. They did not remain long in the ship, however, but after a riotous farewell dinner in the gunroom sailed for England in a cruiser going home to pay off, presently to find themselves at that seat of naval learning at Greenwich, the Royal Naval College, where, to their considerable mortification, they found that their education, so far from being complete, had only just begun. As senior snotties afloat they had been stars in their little firmament; as acting subs at Greenwich among a crowd of others they were very small beer indeed, just glorified schoolboys.

Michael thus found himself in the proud position of the senior midshipman on board, a position in which he had some extra responsibilities and privileges. He had grown a little and his voice had started to deepen, though, still a few months under eighteen, he was not yet officially a senior midshipman and allowed to smoke. Nevertheless, both he and Johnnie Barker constituted themselves senior snotties by brevet, as it were, and assumed the customary privileges, running monthly wine bills of fifteen shillings instead of ten, and smoking in public pipes which hitherto had lain concealed in their chests and were only used privily and away from the roving gaze of superiors. Their assumption of seniority was quite illegal; but nobody worried their heads about their real ages—least of all the new sub, Tarleton, a strenuous officer who was keen on his job and very good at games.

Also, four more junior midshipmen came out from England, and these, with the six already on board, Michael, by virtue of his office, zealously kept in order. He beat them on occasions if he considered they deserved

Digitized by Google

it, and it was supremely refreshing to his dignity to think that at last he could no longer be ordered for his misdemeanours to assume a certain attitude over a table, but that, on the contrary, he could now command inferior beings to place themselves in that constrained position.

Michael became a strict disciplinarian and kept his "warts" well in hand. He inspected them in plain clothes before they were suffered to go ashore, and, borrowing a leaf from Hartopp's book, saw to it that they took plenty of exercise. He even punished them for undue and unofficer-like gluttony. Also he took unto himself an A.D.C., in the shape of the junior midshipman of all, a small, squeaky-voiced youth called "Toby" Kerrel, who was made responsible that nobody else used Michael's bath in the mornings, and that his hot water, soap, nail-brush, and sponge were ready to hand. The A.D.C. had other duties as well, for he composed suitable replies to certain of Michael's more uninteresting letters, and brewed cocoa whenever Michael fancied that beverage. In return for his labours Toby Kerrel was permitted to smoke an occasional cigarette.

It was at this period that Michael, serene in his new-found manhood, purchased his first razor and shaving outfit. They were by no means necessary, for the golden down on his chin and upper lip was still barely perceptible. But all senior snotties shaved, for it was the fashion. Some he had met had chins of the bluest and most delectable description. One, it was said, had even grown a beard, until peremptorily ordered by his commander, on pain of everlasting stoppage of leave, to remove the offending adornment.

Michael, having first cleared the bathroom of all junior midshipmen, lest they be tempted to indulge in ribald and mutinous remarks at the expense of their senior, shaved religiously once a week, on Sunday mornings, to appear at divisions with his countenance adorned with barbarous gashes and sundry tufts of cotton wool.

His lieutenant said nothing, but had difficulty in

Digitized by Google

stifling his amusement. But the fact that Michael had started to shave spread even to the wardroom, and he had to endure a considerable amount of good-natured banter.

"Wind whistling through the whiskers yet?" the commander sometimes thought fit to inquire, gazing at Michael with mock solicitude. "Stand still, boy. Let's have a look at you."

Mr. Moiest, the old gunner, or "Mouldy Moiest," as the snotties called him, who possessed on his dome-shaped skull a sparse crop of grey bristles as still and erect as those in any nail-brush, was also anxious to help.

"Mister Bray," he said in a throaty whisper, having inveigled Michael into his cabin abaft the gunroom flat, "them orficers have been havin' you out for a trot 'cos of your shavin', haven't they now?"

Michael was forced to admit the truth of the statement.

"Well, don't you worry, my son," Mr. Moiest sympathized, looking more mournful than ever. "If you haven't got no whiskers to shave we must just grow 'em, that's all about it."

"But the blessed things won't grow!"

"Ah!" whispered the gunner with an air of great mystery and seemingly on the verge of tears. "Ah, that's where I comes in. Have a peep at my pore old 'ead," he added, breathing heavily, removing his cap and bending his rotund body for the better inspection of his cranium.

"What's the matter with it?" Michael queried suspiciously.

"Matter? Nothin's the matter, Mr. Bray. Fine head o' hair, now isn't it?"

"It might be worse, Mr. Moiest."

"An' three years ago my 'ead was as bald as a baby's starn!" Mr. Moiest exclaimed, brightening up a little.

Michael laughed. "All done by kindness?" he asked.

"All done by ointment, you mean," Mr. Moiest retorted. "Ointment, my son! Ointment of a most

Digitized by Google

marvellious nature the hexact hingredients of which is unknown 'cept to the inventor. Wonnerful stuff. It 'ud grow hair on a graven himage or a bronze statoo. I've got a box for you, Mr. Bray," he added in a sepulchral whisper. " It acts like manure does in a garden——"

" Ugh ! " Michael interrupted with a wry face. " I think I'd rather not try it, if you don't mind."

" Come off it ! " the gunner growled. " I'm not sayin' it is manure. It acts the same, that's all. If you rubs it well in, mornin' and night, you'll have whiskers in no time. You'll feel 'em pushin' through the skin in a week, sproutin' like beans. This time six months you'll be tyin' 'em in knots."

After some further persuasion Michael accepted the gift in the spirit in which it was offered, and with some trepidation started to use it. It smelt extremely unpleasant and made his skin smart, though, grievous to relate, its hair-raising effects were not noticeable. When, after three weeks, he had achieved nothing more than a crop of pimples, the remains of Mr. Moiest's present went overboard through the bathroom scuttle.

It is unnecessary to detail all Michael's comings and goings in the " Boreas " for the two and a half years he remained in her. Being a ship of comparatively deep draught she did not see so much of the station as the smaller vessels, which could poke their noses into every little bay and estuary, and sometimes visited places where Europeans were seldom, if ever, seen. But the " Boreas " went to various places in Japan—to Kobe, Yokohama, Hakodate, Nagasaki, and through the Inland Sea, with its strong currents and wonderful scenery. She visited Manilla, Amoy, Woosung, on the Yang-tse River, Chifu, and Shan-hai-kwan in the Gulf of Pechili, where the snipe, undisturbed for years, were so tame that they sat almost on the muzzle of one's gun.

Several months were spent at Hong-Kong, where, during the winter, the climate was very pleasant, the people ashore were most hospitable, and the snotties

Digitized by Google

enjoyed all the amenities of civilization—games to their hearts' content, dances, picnics, pretty girls to talk to, everything they wanted. But in summer Hong-Kong, just within the tropics, was unconscionably hot—a damp, enervating heat which transformed ships lying at their buoys, even with their awnings and side-screens, into veritable furnaces. The " Boreas " once refitted there at this season and life on board was unbearable. The junior officers deserted the gunroom on the waterline and migrated to a screened-off enclosure on the upper deck, and slept at night on their mattresses spread out on the planking. Even so life was barely worth living. One woke up bathed in perspiration, and always felt lethargic, listless, and irritable. The sick lists swelled to an alarming degree. Various officers and men were sent to the naval hospital, or to the sanatorium at the Peak—several hundred feet above sea level—to recuperate; while there was hardly an officer or a man on board who at one time or another did not suffer from boils, prickly heat, bad mosquito bites, or the dreadful " doby-itch."

Wei-hai-wei, on account of its comparative coolness, was the normal summer resort for the China squadron. The " Boreas " spent a great portion of her time there, including the half of one winter, when the normal temperature was below freezing and lower still during the periodical snow blizzards. Thick snow lay always on the ground, though overhead the sun generally shone in a cloudless sky of hard blue. It was brisk and invigorating weather, though as cold as charity—so cold at times that the midshipmen did no regular school or instruction but spent all their days ashore tobogganing on the sloping road leading down from the signal station. There were geese and wild duck to be shot on the mainland if one cared to trudge for miles through thick snow with rifle and gun and cartridges. But it was a risky business, for two of the officers, encumbered with their weapons and several heavy birds, were overtaken by a violent snowstorm and all but perished in a deep snow-drift. Indeed,

Digitized by Google

if it had not been for some friendly Chinamen, who came upon them utterly exhausted, and took them to their habitation, they might never have survived to tell the tale.

The ship was housed-in fore-and-aft with awnings, and extra stoves were provided on the mess-decks. Even so, people turned in in their hammocks with overcoats and rugs in addition to their blankets, while all the men were served out with woollen mittens, caps with earflaps, mufflers, and thick coats like Arctic explorers.

The winter at Wei-hai-wei was a distinct contrast to that at Hong-Kong, where a Chinaman was once reputed to have come across an icicle, a thing he had never seen before, and adroitly placed it in a bottle for preservation as an heirloom.

Time flew. Michael's eighteenth birthday came and went, and soon there were only six months left before Johnnie Barker and himself would be due to go up for their examinations in seamanship. It was rather a terrifying prospect to be questioned on all manner of abstruse and complicated matters pertaining to the noble art of seamanhood by a board of three captains or commanders, to be turned inside out in rule of the road at sea, signals, anchor work, rigging, the handling of ships and boats, interior organization, ship construction and fittings. Some boards were human and sympathetic, trying to help and to encourage candidates in their efforts to probe their knowledge. But others were the very reverse—barking their questions out like bullets from a Maxim gun and frowning fiercely when the miserable examinees floundered and stuttered in their replies.

If once they scraped through the ordeal Michael and Johnnie would exchange their snotty's patches for the single gold stripes of acting sub-lieutenants and would be sent home by the first man-of-war, to proceed to the College at Greenwich to undergo courses in navigation and pilotage followed by further examinations.

In the practical side of seamanship, things like handling

Digitized by Google

boats and the duties of the officer of the watch at sea, they were tolerably well up and could be trusted not to make fools of themselves. They would not be like the young officer who, when asked what he would do if he were officer of the watch and a man fell overboard during a gale of wind at sea, solemnly replied, " Please, sir, I should call the captain ! "

But putting their heads together they came to the unhappy conclusion that they were woefully ignorant of the more theoretical side of the business ; and supposing they were inflicted with a " bad " board and were ignominiously failed ? Such things, though rare, had been known, and failure, besides making one feel an unutterable fool and an ullage, means a loss of three months' seniority and temporary forfeiture of that coveted gold stripe.

There were so many subjects and so many questions that might be asked in each that it was difficult to know where to begin ; but together they started feverishly to " sweat up," reading and digesting all the seamanship books they could lay their hands upon, going to the lieutenants or warrant officers for help on knotty points, inventing difficult questions to trip each other up. It became dull and monotonous work after a week or two—a weary grind. There was so much that they were supposed to know and so much that they didn't, and Michael's brain sometimes whirled with an awful medley —formulæ for calculating the working and breaking strains of hawsers and tackles, the sizes and lengths of all wire and hemp hawsers carried in the " Boreas " and their respective uses ; the measurements and details of shackles, blocks, chain cables, and the like. Much of the knowledge they acquired was too academic to be of much use. Much also went in at one ear and out at the other ; but some of it stuck.

A letter received from Diana about three months before the seamanship examination made Michael very miserable.

Digitized by Google

" I've an awful piece of news," she wrote: " Daddy married Jenks about ten days ago ! "

Michael, aghast at the information, paused and muttered angrily beneath his breath. He could understand his Uncle James feeling lonely and wishing to marry again for the sake of companionship; but that of all people he should fix upon the unfascinating and frigid Miss Jenkins as a suitable object for the bestowal of his affection and all his worldly goods was utterly beyond his simple comprehension. " Oh, damn ! " he exploded. " Damn AND blast ! "

" I thought some time ago that something peculiar was up," Diana went on in her usual chatty way. " Daddy's been rather mysterious for some time, and once or twice I saw Jenks looking at me in a funny sort of way. Anyhow, they went off to London together, and next day I got a letter from Daddy saying they'd been married quietly without any fuss, and were going to spend a week's honeymoon at Brighton. Oh, Mike, dear, isn't it frightful ! "

" I should jolly well think it was ! " Michael murmured breathing hard. " I'll bet my boots the old beast lurked him in somehow ! "

" They're back now," the letter went on, " and poor Daddy doesn't seem a bit happier, and it makes me fairly sick to see the way Jenks bosses things now that she's mistress. She's so beastly triumphant. She kisses me sometimes and tries to be affectionate. Ugh ! I'd sooner be kissed by a frog ! She said the other day I was her ' dear daughter ' now and ought to call her ' Mother.' Did you ever hear such cheek ? I'm blowed if I will, though, the old pig ! I don't know how I shall bear it for long. I'm feeling jolly miserable, and wish you were here to make things better. I know Jenks doesn't really like me, and she must know I detest her, so how we shall get on I can't imagine. Anyhow, I hate

Digitized by Google

being treated like a child and ordered about now that I am eighteen with my hair up. What Daddy sees in her I don't know.

"Aunt Margaret, my godmother, you remember, is turning out a perfect brick. She wrote a ripping letter to Daddy the other day asking if I could go and stay with her in London for just as long as I liked. She said Kitty would love to have someone of her own age in the house and to go about with. Jenks, I think, is a bit jealous and doesn't really want me to go, and Daddy was a bit frightened about expenses, dresses, and so on, poor dear! Also he rather thinks that London is a wicked and ungodly place, and that if I have a good time there I'll be discontented when I come back. He told all this to Aunt M., I believe, but she wrote back and told him not to be silly and that she wanted to be entirely responsible for all expenses. So I'm off on Thursday and am horribly excited. Miss Jarvis, the little dressmaker in the village, is making me some new garments. They look all right to me, but I expect Kitty will have a fit when she sees them. She's always so well dressed herself and will probably turn up her nose at her poor country cousin, though she is a perfect dear and I like her awfully."

"But what will happen after London I don't know. I suppose I shall come back here until the end of all things, going to stupid tea parties, doing the flowers, playing the piano, and singing at school concerts, making flannel things for the poor people, taking stalls at jumble sales, and trying to lead a devout and saintly life with the eagle eye of Jenks upon me and no greater excitement than the occasional arrival of a strange clergyman to preach on Sundays. I shall get mouldier and mouldier and mouldier. Cheerful prospect, isn't it? I know I'm a discontented beast to talk like this, because Daddy's a perfect pet, and I love him; but I do long for a little excitement sometimes, or to go abroad or do something —anything but this. I quite see I wasn't cut out to be a clergyman's daughter, and if I were a boy instead of a

Digitized by Google

rotten girl things might be different. Why can't Jenks be human instead of as cold as a graven image? I do so wish you were here. Things would be bearable if you were. Take care of yourself and come home soon. Heaps of love from

"DIANA."

"Poor old girl!" Michael sighed, replacing the missive in its envelope and placing it in his inside breast pocket preparatory to adding it to the bundle in the locked private till of his sea-chest.

He was not emotional, but he treasured Diana's letters as she treasured his, and read them again and again. And in the same locked receptacle where he kept them he had also a number of more personal mementoes of her—an old hair ribbon he had wantonly stolen on the lawn at home years before, the chewed stub end of a pencil, showing the marks of her strong, sharp teeth, sundry photographs, and a little lock of her tawny golden hair tied round with sewing cotton. How well he remembered creeping softly behind her in the schoolroom one pelting wet day and surreptitiously cutting it off with a pair of nail scissors.

These little relics were rather sacred. He would have hated anyone else to have seen them, for at once he would have been jeered at as being mawkish and sentimental, a love-sick young fool. But often and often he gazed at those things which had been Diana's and handled them with a peculiar sort of reverence in his heart. They had belonged to her, and were a consolation to him when he felt lonely and despondent, for somehow they seemed to bring her nearer and to make her real and human, instead of a remote and inaccessible person separated from him by two great continents and many thousands of miles of sea.

Michael was not perhaps in love, for he was young and inexperienced and had met very few girls. Feminine society was not necessary to his happiness. He could

Digitized by Google

get on without it. Nevertheless, he was fonder of Diana than of anyone else he knew, male or female, and her good opinion of him meant more to him than anything else in the world. And it grieved him bitterly to think of her as unhappy and lonely. He felt impotent and helpless, and except by writing an ill-expressed and ineffectual letter of sympathy which would at least take six weeks to reach her there were no other means of consolation—nothing he could do.

Michael Bray *Chapter XXI*

JUNE: June at Hong-Kong and nearly ten o'clock at night; but darkness had brought no alleviation to the intense heat of the day. There was not a breath of air stirring even in the harbour. In the "Boreas's" school-place down on the lower deck near the waterline, with the unshaded electric lights reflected from the steel, white-painted bulkheads, the atmosphere was dank and stagnant, as unrefreshing as the inside of an oven.

On the white beams and deck overhead cockroaches scurried to and fro, intent upon their business, occasionally to drop upon the table. They were the scouts of a colony which clustered in a thick brown mass round a steam-pipe in the far corner over a row of lockers—a colony whose population was ever on the increase despite constant spraying with carbolic and paraffin.

Michael, stripped to trousers and thin vest, but still moist and unpleasantly sticky, leant back on the padded lockers along the ship's side under the three scuttles wide open to the night. His feet were on the table and an unlit pipe was in his mouth. Grunting at intervals and making ineffectual dabs at a persistent mosquito trumpeting fitfully at his right ear, he was reading through a note-book on ship construction, trying hard to concentrate. The seamanship examination was only three days ahead.

Digitized by Google

Close beside him at the table, busy with sketching block and paint box, Johnnie Barker struggled with a track-chart for his journal. Fifty valuable marks were apportioned to the state of a candidate's log and journal, and Johnnie's presented a great and barren contrast to Michael's, which bulged with neat sketches, diagrams, or charts on nearly every page, embellishments calculated to impress an examiner and to distract his attention from defects in style and quality of information.

Johnnie, anything but neat-fingered, hated drawing; but now, at the eleventh hour, strove valiantly to make up for lost time with a masterpiece showing the ship's track in vermilion and the coasts of China and Formosa thickly outlined in bilious chrome yellow. It was an unsightly production, but the last chart he ever hoped to do as a midshipman.

Through the open scuttles came the gurgling sound of the oily ripples alongside, the occasional "Boat ahoy!" of a watchful signalman on the bridge, and sometimes the swishing hum of a passing steamboat or the splash of oars and chattering conversation from a *sampan*. Through the door opposite came sudden bursts of so-called melody from the gunroom across the flat, mingled with the shrill tinkle of the piano. It was punctuated now and then by the strident snoring of a sleeper in his hammock just outside, who, oblivious to the noise, slumbered peacefully with a glaring electric light within eighteen inches of his face. From somewhere deep down in the bowels of the ship came the deep, rhythmic hum of a dynamo.

"Oh, curse this rotten sketch!" cried Johnnie in vexation. "I can't get the beastly paint to run. The paper sucks it up and it all goes thick and soggy. Phew!" he added, wiping his heated face with a grimy handkerchief also doing duty as a painting rag. "Isn't this heat too chronic for words?"

Michael looked up with a prodigious yawn. He felt tired and listless. There were dark rings round his eyes, and his face, sticky with the heat, looked unusually pale.

Digitized by Google

" Hot ? " he said, flinging down his book, removing his feet from the table, and kneeling up on the settee to look out of the scuttle. " It's perfectly ghastly ! I'm about fed up with sweating my guts out for this cursed exam. I can't sleep decently at nights, what with the heat and questions and answers rushing round in my head. I've got a beastly headache now. Why the deuce aren't we in England, Tubby ? June in England—just think of it ! "

He sighed wistfully.

" Lord, yes ! " his friend agreed. " England—tennis on a decent green lawn with girls skippin' about in summer dresses and the smell of cut grass. A long bath afterwards, just nicely tepid. Then change for a pukka full-belly dinner with cut glass and flowers on the table, none of Ah Ying's ghastly messes. Then——"

" Oh, Lord ! " Michael groaned, " don't go on."

" Then a decent bed with linen sheets in a room with the window open and the smell of laburnum and things coming in from outside instead of a fuggy hammock. Wake up in the morning—cold bath—breakfast with kidneys and bacon and fresh butter and coffee ! I'm sick of mosquitoes and cockroaches with their loathsome stink ; sick of tinned butter like train-oil and of having prickly heat and boils on my neck and of the beastly green fungus that grows on one's boots in a day or two ! I'm sick of having no money—sick of everything ! "

" It is a dog's life sometimes," Michael was forced to admit. " It's unnatural in a way, though I must say the people here are jolly kind in asking us to their houses and entertaining us. Still, most of the women are married and miles older than us, and I feel all the time they look on us as children. I'm getting fed up with being mothered. I like meeting girls my own age."

" By George, yes ! " Johnnie agreed. " When I think of that young dog of a brother of mine at Eton living in the lap of luxury it sometimes makes me squirm. Think of the Eton and Harrow match at Lord's with salmon

Digitized by Google

mayonnaise and cold chicken and cherry tart and cream on top of a coach and girls galore—old girls, young girls, pretty girls, ugly girls ; the whole boiling caboodle. He'll be at Henley in my people's punt and will have cricket and tennis all the summer. And presently he'll go up to Oxford, the lucky bargee, and have a better time still. He doesn't know what it is not to have a clean shirt to his name or a suit of clothes fit to wear or a pair of boots without a hole in their soles! Ye gods! Sometimes I envy the little blighter."

"But why did you join the navy?"

"Because I felt I wanted to," said Johnnie. "I sort of had to. Books I'd read and things like that. My old governor hadn't anything to do with it. He was a bit annoyed, in fact—called me a fool because I was the eldest and he wanted me to go to Eton and the 'Varsity and to join him in the business. Lord!" he chuckled, "fancy me goin' up to town every day with a little black bag."

"D'you regret not having done it?" Michael queried.

"No—o. Not really. There's something rather fascinating about the Service, don't mind what you say. I've seen a jolly sight more than my young brother ever will. He's never been put in charge of men to do a job of work, and hasn't sailed a boat half full of water with all reefs down in a gale o' wind, or shot snipe under the lee of the Great Wall of China. He hasn't been in a typhoon or been shot at by stinkin' Chinese and seen men killed and guns poppin' off in earnest. No. He's never been farther than Dieppe, and then he was beastly seasick. He belongs to the cadet corps and has his photo taken in uniform with a lot of other little pipsqueaks with carbines and their caps all skew-wiff. He's still learning Greek and Latin and thinking himself no end of a dog because he plays cricket for his House. Pooh! He's still a child!"

"Cheer up, Tubby!" Michael laughed. "You wouldn't swop billets with your brother if you could, would you?"

Digitized by Google

" Bet your life I wouldn't, Mike."

" You're mouldy, Tubby, that's what's the matter with you, my son. I'm mouldy too ; but do you realize that in another couple of months we'll be home ? "

" But supposin' the brutes fail me and put me back for three months ? " Johnnie demanded, not easily to be consoled. " I feel sometimes I know nothing—absolutely nothing—and there is such a hell of a lot of questions they can ask. It makes me sick to think of 'em."

" Don't be such a fathead ! " Michael said, a little impatiently, for failure was Johnnie's pet topic nowadays. " You're not so badly up, and if you keep your head and don't get rattled you'll be as right as rain."

" D'you really think so, old man ? "

" Course I do," said Michael. " Haven't I said so dozens of times ? But I don't wonder at your feeling addled at this time of night. The heat's enough to finish anyone. Lord ! "—he broke off irritably as a shouted chorus drifted across from the gunroom over the way—" hark at the beastly row those devils are making. What the deuce they can find to sing about I'm jiggered if I know ! "

" I vote we chuck work for to-night and have a drink and then turn in," Johnnie suggested. " I'm as tired as a dog and we're both fed up."

" Let's," Michael agreed.

They put their books and drawing implements away in their lockers, resumed their tunics, and left the schoolplace together.

The seamanship examination was not the fearful ordeal that Michael and Johnnie had imagined.

Punctually at 9.20 on the eventful morning, wearing dirks and immaculate whites, and with their logs, journals and certificates, they presented themselves on board the cruiser " Clytie," whose captain was president of the examining board. Here, with a snotty from another ship, an overgrown, angular youth named Eames in a very tight and abbreviated tunic, with his long, thin legs,

Digitized by Google

encased in absurdly short trousers, terminating in the largest feet that Michael had ever seen, they were taken charge of by a lieutenant and conducted to the lobby outside the captain's cabin, where they found a table laid out with paper and writing implements.

Michael and Johnnie were at once set to work on a paper on ship construction, while Eames, the senior candidate of the bunch, was ushered into the captain's cabin for his viva-voce at the hands of the three inquisitors.

"Cheer up, boy!" laughed the lieutenant, noticing Eames's nervousness. "Pull yourself together. They won't eat you. Have you got all your certificates and things?"

"Y—yes, sir, I think so."

The lieutenant, rapping on the mahogany door of the captain's cabin, flung it open.

"Mr. Eames, sir. The first candidate," he announced. "Come on, Eames," he said fiercely over his shoulder, as the wretched youth still hesitated. "Get a move on. Don't keep 'em waiting."

Eames, clutching his log and journals and a large bundle of assorted documents in one bony hand, and the other steadying the dirk swinging at his left hip, advanced blindly, in a sort of jog-trot. How the accident happened cannot exactly be explained. One moment he was erect; but the next, catching his foot clumsily in the high sill of the door, Michael saw his books and papers slithering to the ground. His great body swayed for a moment with his hands clawing at thin air as he tried to save himself, and then suddenly shot head-foremost into the captain's cabin, where he fell on his hands and knees on the carpet. It was all over in a moment.

A burst of very human laughter from within greeted his unceremonious appearance.

The lieutenant, stifling his merriment, stepped inside, assisted the fallen warrior to his feet, ascertained he was more startled than hurt, helped him to collect his

Digitized by Google

scattered property, and retired, closing the door behind him.

"Very neatly done," he said, grinning all over his face. "That will put the skipper in a good temper for the rest of the day. Eames seems a bit of an acrobat; but it's the first time I've ever seen a snotty dive into his seamanship exam on all fours!"

"Now then, you two," he added, "stop laughing and weigh in with the construction paper. Time allowed, forty minutes by the clock. No reference to any books, and Heaven help you if I catch you talking or cribbing. Only five of the questions are to be answered, and for goodness' sake make your answers short. I've got to correct 'em."

For the next thirty-five minutes, while the lieutenant sat at the end of the table busy with a book and foolscap setting a paper for the "Clytie's" midshipmen, whose seamanship instruction he was responsible for, Michael wrote hard, occasionally taking up his pencil to dash off a diagram.

The questions seemed surprisingly easy, and his difficulty was not so much in answering them as in knowing how to curtail his replies. Johnnie, too, from the speed at which he wrote, seemed to be getting on well.

"Five minutes more," said the lieutenant, after what seemed no more than a few minutes.

Michael, pinning his papers together, looked hurriedly through them and handed them in. A minute or two later the cabin door opened and Eames, his nervousness gone and his face wreathed in a smile, emerged.

"I was told to tell you that they'd ring the bell when they wanted the next one, sir," he said.

"Right. How did you get on?"

"Better than I expected, sir."

"Good! Barker, time's up; hand in your papers. Eames, Barker and yourself will go up to the after shelter-deck to be examined in signals. I will be up there with the signal officer in a minute or two."

An electric bell rang.

Digitized by Google

" That's for you, Bray," said the lieutenant. " In you go, my son, and walk, please. Don't take a header."

Michael, screwing up his courage and swallowing nervously, opened the door and stepped inside.

At the head of the table sat the " Clytie's " captain, a short, slightly bald, heavily built man with a multi-coloured string of ribbons across the breast of his white tunic, a cheerful red face, and an eyeglass dangling round his neck. Michael had no fear of him, for " Old Tin-eye," according to the " Clytie's " snotties, though sometimes inclined to be livery in the early mornings, was " one of the best." At any rate he was always sending his impecunious young officers on picnics and riding paper-chases at his expense, wherefore they loved him exceedingly.

Sitting on his right was a tall, dark-haired commander with a black beard, the commanding officer of one of the sloops. He, having just come to the station, was unknown to Michael; but somehow his face did not look unkind. The examiner he was really frightened of was Commander Trevor, the " Clytie's " commander, a dapper little man with rather a fierce expression and a pair of penetrating blue eyes, who prided himself on his " smart ship " and had the reputation of being a martinet who harried all midshipmen for the good of their souls.

" Sit down over there, boy," said the president affably, screwing in his monocle and regarding Michael with a quizzical expression. " You're Bray, eh ? "

" Yes, sir."

" Any relation to the Staffordshire Brays ? "

" They're—er—I think they're sort of cousins of my father's, sir."

The " Clytie's " commander was becoming impatient. Would the captain never learn that he was a busy man and that every moment of his time was valuable ? Here he was catechizing a midshipman about his relations, when he, the commander, among a hundred and one other things, was desperately anxious to get away to see

Digitized by Google

how his painting party were getting on with the enamelling of the after screen bulkhead facing the quarter-deck. It was important from the point of view of the ship's appearance, and every drop of that white enamel had been paid for by himself. It was almost worth its weight in silver dollars, and he felt quite certain in his mind that his rapscallions were slopping the precious stuff on anyhow, scattering it indiscriminately over their own worthless persons, and anointing his spotless white deck. Glancing at the clock on the bulkhead he cleared his throat and began to fidget with his papers.

" All right, all right, Trevor," grunted the captain, noticing these signs of impatience. " There's no hurry. We've heaps of time. I used to play golf with a Ronald Bray," he continued, turning again to Michael. " No. Rupert—Ronald—no, damme, I can't remember his name, except that it began with an R."

" Roderick, sir ? " Michael put it.

The " Clytie's " commander stifled a yawn and glanced anxiously at his *vis-a-vis*. Would the captain never get to business ? Confound this brat of a midshipman for wasting his time !

" Yes, yes," Captain Keighley continued. " Roderick, to be sure. My memory's all gone to pot. He's a retired major in the Gunners, the man I mean—great long fellow with a wonderful drive. D'ye know him, boy ? "

" Yes, sir. I've met him once or twice ; but not for a good many years."

" Humph ! " grunted the president. " He was a jolly good chap from what I remember of him. A bit groggy on one leg from a wound he'd got on the Indian frontier. So you'll be the son of Julian Bray, Sir Julian as he is now, eh ? I met him once or twice years ago when I was in the East Indies."

" Yes, sir," Michael answered, wondering with the " Clytie's " commander whether this was a seamanship examination or an inquiry into his family history.

Captain Keighley nodded. " Well," he said, " we must

Digitized by Google

get to business. Let's look at your log and journal, boy."

Michael handed them across, and the captain turned over the pages, pausing every now and then to glance at a sketch or drawing, to which he drew the attention of the others.

"Very neat," Michael heard him say in what he imagined to be a low whisper. "Bit of an artist, too. Look at this sketch. Damme! I should have known it for Wei-hai-wei without ever looking at the title. Oh, no!" he added, peering through his eyeglass. "My mistake. It isn't Wei-hai-wei at all; its Shan-hai-kwan. Look, Slater, here's the Great Wall of China and the forts with the mountains in the background. It's quite like it, too. We know Shan-hai-kwan quite well, Trevor, don't we? You may not believe it, Slater, but I once shot forty couple of snipe there to my own gun in under an hour! I should have got more, but my barrels got so hot that I couldn't see to shoot through the haze they made. Wonderful place, Shan-hai-kwan, eh, Trevor?"

"Yes, sir. Wonderful snipe shooting," the commander agreed, winking across the table before tactfully looking aside to hide his smile. Captain Keighley was well known as a raconteur. Some of his sporting experiences were truly marvellous.

"He's evidently taken a lot of trouble," the captain went on. "What d'you say, Slater—shall we give the young devil full marks? Eh, commander, what d'you think?"

The two commanders nodded, and Michael joyfully watched the notation being made.

"Tidy—very well kept, indeed," said the captain, closing the books and handing them back to their owner. "Reminds me of the journal I kept as a midshipman. Now, young man, I'll ask you a question or two on rigging. How is your lower rigging in the 'Boreas' secured and set up?"

Michael told him.

Digitized by Google

" You've got to lift a six-inch gun from your forecastle into a lighter alongside. How would you set about it ? "

Michael described the rigging of sheer-legs, one or other of the examiners stopping him every now and then to ask for further elucidation.

It would be tedious to give a recital of all the questions hurled at Michael's head and the replies he gave. He was asked how he would moor and unmoor ship, the lengths and breaking strains of wire and hemp hawsers, how he would take a disabled ship in tow stern first, what he would do as officer of the watch in harbour if a liberty-man came off fighting drunk, and at sea in a gale of wind on the starboard quarter if a man fell overboard and no boat could be lowered. Also, what he would do if he found himself in charge of a cruiser groping her way through a thick fog in the midst of dense traffic, what lights were carried by a telegraph ship not under control and a lightship broken adrift from her moorings, and how he would distinguish at night between a steam trawler working her nets and a vessel fishing with drift nets. Conundrums followed as to the procedure carried out on commissioning, the berthing and messing of a ship's company, the supply and markings of casks and cases containing rum, vinegar, lime juice, salt beef and pork, biscuit, cocoa, raisins, split peas, and tobacco.

At times he hardly knew whether he was standing on his head or his heels, so rapidly were questions fired at his defenceless head. The examiners—or two of them, for Captain Keighley soon gave up the contest and amused himself by drawing pictures on his blotting-pad and making a fleet of paper boats out of foolscap—turned him literally inside out for a full forty-three minutes by the clock. He felt limp and bedraggled, his brain sucked absolutely dry.

" I've nothing further to ask him, sir," said the bearded commander at last. " I'm quite satisfied."

" What about you, Trevor ? " the captain asked, looking up.

Digitized by Google

" I've no more questions, sir. We've run through all the subjects."

" Good ! " the captain exclaimed. " Now I'll ask him a question or two to top off with. Tell me, boy, why does a piece of salt beef weigh eight pounds and a piece of salt pork weigh four ? "

Commander Trevor raised his hand to his mouth to repress a yawn. The skipper was off again. Another few minutes of this and he'd go mad.

That priceless enamel must long since have gone to glory. He groaned inwardly.

" Because a bullock is a larger animal than a pig, sir," Michael answered.

" And supposin' you had your choice, boy—which is the best part of salt pork ? "

" The buttons, sir," Michael promptly replied, having been primed with this item of nautical gastronomy by the " Boreas's " old boatswain.

" And supposin' the ship's cook came along to you and said something about Charley Noble—who could he be referring to ? "

" The galley funnel, sir," Michael said at once.

" Right, boy." Captain Keighley beamed. " That'll do. Tell the other young gentleman to present himself in five minutes. You'll all hear the results of your examinations before noon. My compliments to your father when you write. Good morning to you."

Michael, the ordeal over, collected his belongings, hove a sigh of thankful relief, and bowed himself out of the cabin.

It is needless to describe the signal examination, when Michael was severely tested as to his knowledge of morse, semaphore, signal-books and fog signals, the colours and meanings of the many signal flags, and the organization and conduct of a fleet. Nor is it necessary to say how Eames, Johnnie, and Michael were taken away in a boat, ordered to make sail, and to sail round the " Clytie " and come alongside while the

Digitized by Google

three examiners stood on the quarter-deck looking on.

There followed half an hour's suspense in the gunroom while they waited to hear the results, and during which they were regaled with sherry and bitters and cigarettes. The hands of the clock crept slowly round towards twelve o'clock.

"What about having your lunch here?" asked the "Clytie's" sub affably, as the table was being laid for the noonday meal. "They may be another hour making up their minds."

Ten minutes to twelve . . . three minutes to . . . eight bells, accompanied by the twittering of boatswain's pipes on the upper deck as the ship's company were piped to dinner.

Five minutes past the hour . . . a knock on the gunroom door.

"The orficers oo've bin under examination is wanted at once in the capten's cabin, sir," said a marine orderly.

Buckling on their dirks and collecting their caps and belongings they repaired to the captain's lobby, where Eames, as the senior, timidly rapped on the door and opened it.

"Come in, boy," the others heard Captain Keighley say. "One at a time."

The door closed, and Johnnie and Michael were left alone.

"Isn't it awful?" said Johnnie, licking his dry lips. "I wonder if I've scraped through?"

"I'll bet you have," Michael assured him, his own heart throbbing as he tried to conceal his impatience.

Would Eames never reappear? They seemed to be keeping him a deuce of a time. One minute . . . two minutes. . . . What was keeping him? Why in heaven didn't he return?

Footsteps . . . the opening of the door . . . Eames, with a smiling face.

"Bray," he said, "they want you."

Digitized by Google

"Are you all right?" Michael whispered.

"Yes. I've got a 'two.'" [1]

"Good for you!" said Michael, entering the cabin and closing the door behind him.

"You've passed a very creditable examination, Bray," said Captain Keighley, placing his sprawling signature across a printed certificate. "You have fairly earned your 'one.' I congratulate you."

A "one"! Michael could hardly believe his ears. He felt he wanted to whoop, to burst into tears—anything to show his joy.

"Thank you, sir," he managed to stammer.

"Don't thank me, boy," said the captain. "Here you are. Sign this paper and then you can go back to your ship as soon as you like and put on the new shoulder straps I'll bet you've got ready."

Michael signed his name and date and place of birth with a shaking hand. A "one"! Ye gods and little fishes!

"Right!" said Captain Keighley, with a smile. "Take the certificate with you. Good morning, and don't forget my compliments to your father. Tell Mr. Barker to come in."

Michael, bowing to his examiners in turn, wished them a good morning and retired.

"Well?" asked Johnnie, with a woebegone face.

"I've got a 'one,'" Michael answered, trying hard to conceal his jubilation. "Hurry up, Tubby. They want you."

"Oh, you lucky devil!" Johnnie murmured, disappearing behind the closing door.

A minute . . . two minutes . . . three . . . then the reappearance of Johnnie clutching a certificate with a broad grin on his face.

[1] First, second or third class certificates were known respectively as a "one," "two," or "three." The total marks were 1,000, and 90 per cent had to be obtained for a "one," 75 per cent for a "two," and 60 per cent for a "three." Candidates obtaining under 60 per cent were failed.

Digitized by Google

" They've given me a ' two ' ! " he exclaimed joyfully. " A ' two,' and I hardly knew a thing ! "

" Oh, don't talk such rot ! " Michael laughed, squeezing his friend's arm in a sudden burst of affection. " Lord, we're acting subs ! Let's back to the ship and shed these rotten dirks ! "

They were acting sub-lieutenants indeed, and twenty minutes later, in new white tunics minus the midshipmen's patches, but with blue shoulder-straps garnished with the single row of gold lace and curl denoting their new rank, they were receiving the congratulations of the " Boreas's " gunroom.

The same evening the new stripes were duly " wetted " at their expense, a process which included free drinks for every one and cost them considerably more than they could afford. However, promotion was too magnificent a thing not to be properly celebrated, though it is desirable to draw a veil over the ceremony itself, and the somewhat riotous sing-song which began in the gunroom and ended in the wardroom towards one o'clock in the morning in a friendly rough and tumble in which the surgeon was completely bereft of his clothes.

" I n—never properly knew how pop—pop—popular we were," Johnnie murmured, as he stood at his sea-chest preparatory to turning in, wondering exactly which garment he should try to take off first. " Jolly good crowd of chapsh in the wardroom. Commandersh sitting on fleet paymastersh chest all merry and bright. Split my best breeches from clew to earringsh ! Dickens of a head I've got ! "

" It was a bit of a jag," Michael agreed wearily. " My sainted aunt ! it's been a deuce of a day, Tubby, hasn't it ? "

" Day ? " Johnnie returned with a leer. " Day and half the b—blooming bally nightsh ! I say, funny ole bird, do you realize we're acting subsh ? My poor old head's buzzing, buzzing——" His voice dwindled away to a murmur.

Digitized by Google

Headaches, not unfrequently, are the penalties of new-found greatness.

Michael Bray — *Chapter XXII*

At five-and-twenty minutes past ten on a sultry summer morning nine days after their seamanship examination, Michael and Johnnie Barker, with a number of other officers, were standing on the after shelter-deck of the cruiser "Hyperion." They had left the "Boreas" for good and all.

The "Hyperion" was under orders for home and was about to sail. Boats had been hoisted in and secured for sea. Her two funnels were smoking and the yellow masts were swathed in their canvas "steaming covers." The ship rode at her buoy by a slip-rope, and the white "paying-off pendant" flying from her main truck stirred uneasily in the fitful breeze. It was longer than the ship herself, but some hundreds of feet of it were carefully coiled up on the after bridge out of harm's way with the gilded bladder at its extremity.

A number of *sampans*, some bringing belated washing, others with tradesmen collecting debts, were clustered under the stern and alongside. Many Chinese tradesmen were still on board, and the master-at-arms and his satellites were doing their utmost to chase them back into their boats.

A heated wrangle was in progress between a midshipman whose washing had been lost and a vituperant Chinese laundry-woman clad in coat and loose trousers of shiny black silk.

"You b'long one piecee pilong!"[1] she shrilled. "I bling washing las' week, and now you say I no bling! Why for you no pay moneh? Two dollah fifety-eight cent."

[1] Pilong = thief, robber.

Digitized by Google

"You takee washing wrong ship!" the snotty protested. "My makee lose shirt, collar, tunics because you b'long silly old woman! My no catch washing, you no catch money, savvy?"

"Aie vah! Moping kaiti! Mal-'a-ka-pei!" retorted the lady at the top of her voice, lapsing into unparliamentary language. "My go catch washing other ship, makee sell!"

"You're welcome, old girl," laughed the young officer.

What did a few shirts, collars, and a tunic or so matter to an improvident midshipman on his way to England?

"Hoist permission to proceed, sir?" asked the signal boatswain on the bridge, noting the time by the chart-house clock.

"Please, Mr. Bennett."

The signal boatswain waved a hand and a string of signal flags climbed to the cruiser's fore truck, to be answered in the flagship, half a mile away, by the appearance of the red, white-crossed "affirmative" flag, which sped aloft to remain stationary a few feet below the main truck. The "Hyperion's" signal was seen and understood.

A short breathing space, and the flagship's affirmative ascended to the masthead.

"Signal's approved, sir!" cried Mr. Bennett. "Down," he added, waving a hand to the signalman standing by the halliards.

The "Hyperion's" signal came down from aloft in a fluttering curve of coloured bunting.

"Slip!" ordered the captain, hailing the forecastle from the compass platform over the bridge.

The first-lieutenant on the forecastle nodded, a blacksmith struck twice with his maul, and the end of the wire slip rope dropped into the water with a splash. The ranks of the forecastle broke as men manned the free end.

"Haul away!" shouted the first lieutenant. "Run her in!"

Digitized by Google

"All clear, sir!" a moment later, as the eye of the wire appeared in the hawse-pipe. "'Vast hauling!"

The engine-room telegraphs jangled and the water swirled under the stern as the propellers started to revolve and the ship swung on her heel.

"Slow astern port! Stop port! Half ahead port!" came the captain's orders in rapid succession as the bows swung clear of the buoy. "Ease to fifteen! Midships! Meet her port! Steady! Forty revolutions! Take her out, Mortimer," he added to the navigator.

In the flagship, the "Boreas," the "Clytie," the old depot-ship "Tamar," a couple of sloops and a destroyer or two lying at their bows, the upper decks were crowded with men. Presently boatswain's pipes started to twitter and numbers of them could be seen scampering aloft until the rigging was dappled with white figures. The sun glinted on brazen instruments and the fixed bayonets of the guards and bands on the quarter-decks of the larger ships.

Gathering headway the "Hyperion" crept slowly abreast of the flagship.

"Guard—'shun!" ordered the captain of marines on the quarter-deck. "Shoulder—arms! Admiral's salute. Pre—sent arms!"

The officer's drawn sword flashed as he raised it to his chin and dropped it in unison with the movements of his men, whose rifles and twinkling bayonets moved as one.

"One—two—three!" muttered the bandmaster, beating time with his baton, and his men blared out the "few bars of a lively march" prescribed by the regulations for the salute to a flag officer.

On the flagship's bridge two hundred yards away the admiral himself stepped forward and acknowledged the salute, adding a touch of informality by taking off his gold-peaked cap and waving good-bye. Behind him the waving arms of one of the semaphores spelt out a farewell message. A signal shot aloft: "Cheer ship."

The "Hyperion" was gathering speed. On her after

Digitized by Google

bridge a man had slowly uncoiled the great paying-off pendant until the gilded bladder at its extremity skipped along the water some hundreds of feet astern.

"Stand by to cheer ship!" came a voice through a megaphone from the flagship. A pause.

Then, "Three cheers for the 'Hyperion'—Hip-hip-hip——" the resulting "Hurrah!" from something over eight hundred men shouting in unison booming out in a rolling volume of sound. Again, and yet again. There was no mistaking its whole-heartedness.

"Three cheers for the 'Glory'!" came the voice of the "Hyperion's" commander from the fore-bridge. "Hip-hip-hip——" Again the deafening "Hurrahs!" from the men who thronged the cruiser's upper and boat decks and hung precariously in the rigging frenziedly waving their caps or showering from aloft handfuls of torn up coloured paper.

The band on the flagship's quarter-deck burst into "Auld Lang Syne" and followed it with "Home, Sweet Home," while the "Hyperion's" musicians, not to be outdone, did their best to drown it with "Rolling Home to Merrie England."

And on the cruiser steamed, faster and faster, past the "Clytie," past the destroyers and sloops, past the "Boreas"—bands blaring, men cheering and shouting themselves hoarse, semaphores waving their arms as they wished her a happy voyage and a safe return to England.

"I am sorry to see the last of the 'Hyperion,'" signalled the admiral, the commander-in-chief. "Have pleasure in informing you that your ship's company have been granted an additional ten days' leave by their Lordships in recognition of their arduous services in North China. Wish you all success and a safe passage home."

Michael, his telescope steadied against a stanchion as he gazed at a group of cheering officers on the "Boreas's" quarter-deck, felt strangely emotional and excited.

Digitized by Google

It was good to be going home, good to be an acting sub instead of a humble snotty; but the "Boreas" had been his home for thirty long and eventful months. On board her he had had good times and bad times—the good always predominating—and, seamanlike, he loved his old ship as a sentient being rather than as an inanimate moving mass of steel and wood. To him she was *the* ship of the entire British Navy, and for the time being it seemed as if no other ship in the world could ever be her equal in efficiency, cleanliness, and all-round smartness. And he liked to think that he had been part of her, and that, as such, he had had his share in making her smart and efficient. True, it was a small share; but a share, nevertheless.

And the officers and men—what an excellent lot of shipmates they had been. The uproarious crowd in the gunroom; the more sedate seniors in the wardroom; the commander who had harried him, unmercifully at times, for his sins and omissions; the captain; the fiery old fleet paymaster who doled out his monthly pay and somehow or other, grumbling dreadfully, always managed to give him an advance of pay whenever he was chronically hard up; the "Old Doc." who had seen him safely through "Hong-Kong dog"; the boatswain, the gunner, and any number of other officers—how he hated leaving them behind.

The men, too—the men of his division with their funny little ways and tricks which he knew so well; his gun's crew; the crews of the boats he had successively been in charge of; old Chivers, the chief boatswain's mate of the upper deck. It was rather horrible to think that they were all going out of his life and he out of theirs. Would they miss him a little and remember him? He wondered.

"I can't stand it, Tubby," said Michael, gulping like a baby in spite of the new gold stripe on his shoulder. "It's beastly leaving the old ship, I don't care what you say. I feel as if I could almost weep."

Digitized by Google

"Same here, old man," Johnnie agreed. "She was a deuced good ship, and such a jolly good crowd of fellows in her! Oh, Lord! it's rotten seeing the last of her."

"Two and a half years since we commissioned at Pompey,"[1] said Michael. "Sometimes it seems like yesterday; but sometimes it seems as if I'd been in the 'Boreas' all my life."

Johnnie nodded. "We'll be lucky if we ever get another ship like her," he observed.

"We never shall," Michael murmured disconsolately.

They stayed on deck until the "Hyperion" turned to negotiate the narrow Lyemun Pass leading to the open sea, and the "Boreas" was nothing but an indistinct blur against the background of land and shipping beyond. Then an intervening tongue of land shut her out of their sight.

The "Boreas" was a thing of the past—a dream. Another chapter of Michael's life had been ended.

Michael Bray — *Chapter XXIII*

THE "Hyperion" rolled a little in the slight following swell as she steamed up-Channel. Ushant with its white lighthouse had been passed the provious afternoon, and at 2 a.m. the triple flash of the Casquets light had shone out of the darkness on the starboard beam. Now, an hour after daylight, the Isle of Wight should soon be in sight.

The captain had been called at dawn and was already on the upper bridge, while the navigator, close beside him, occasionally swept the horizon to the north-eastward with his binoculars for the first signs of land. The officer of the watch, a recently promoted lieutenant, bronzed by eastern suns after three years' service in a gunboat up the Yang-tse-kiang, stood by the standard

[1] "Pompey." Navalese for Portsmouth.

Digitized by Google

compass and passed an occasional order through a voice-pipe to the man at the helm below.

The captain, in the best of spirits, chatted gaily with the navigator and officer of the watch. Even the navigator, usually the most dour and morose of individuals, burdened with an early morning hate for all mankind, seemed unduly cheerful.

It was a calm, windless morning. There were many ships in sight, and a mile away to starboard a dingy collier tramp, steaming stolidly down-Channel with a trail of black smoke defiling the clean air behind her, dipped her ragged red ensign as she passed. A homely topsail schooner with patched canvas was standing in towards the invisible English coast, and far away to port beyond her could be seen the shape of a great White Star liner with a bone in her teeth steaming fast to the westward. To starboard, towards the French coast, the white canvas of a four-masted barque showed up like an iceberg over the horizon. There were other vessels —some steamers and some sailing ships; some near at hand, others hull-down and showing no more than pyramids of canvas or masts, funnels and upper works outlined against the clear sky. Everywhere the horizon was dotted with smoke puffs rising almost vertically in the still air.

An indeterminate blue smudge crept up over the horizon on the port bow—a smudge so faint and nebulous that it might have been a cloud. But as the able seaman aloft gazed at it it seemed gradually to darken until within a few minutes, he saw it as a low hummock of purplish-blue against the pale sky on the horizon. It was over twenty miles distant; but unmistakable land—the Isle of Wight—England!

"Land on the port bow, sir!" he hailed, putting his head over the edge of the crow's-nest and pointing with his hand.

A figure far below on the upper bridge waved an arm in reply.

Digitized by Google

The news spread fast. Forecastle and upper deck became populated with men in various stages of deshabille. They were happy and very talkative. The sound of their laughing chatter ascended even to the crow's-nest.

England in sight!

They were home at last from the shiny East, with its wealth of glamour and romance. Home to England—the place of grey skies and rain and impenetrable fogs and biting cold winds in winter: nevertheless, the best country in the world.

"It's St. Catherine's all right," said Michael on the quarter-deck some time later, handing his telescope to Johnnie Barker. "I can see the lighthouse. We're going twelve knots. We shall be anchored at Spithead by half-past ten."

"And then for the beach and some leave!" sighed Johnnie thankfully, steadying the glass against a stanchion and peering through it. "This beastly trip home at ten knots most of the way has seemed interminable. By gum! I shall be glad to get ashore again after the rotten food and the crowd and fug in the gunroom. We've been herded like pigs—hardly room to move. I wonder if my people will be waiting at Pompey," he chattered on. "In a letter I got at Gib they said they'd probably come down to meet me."

"Lucky dog!" Michael grunted. "No such luck for me. My father's in India, and I don't expect the uncle I live with will turn up. Lord knows how I shall spend my leave," he went on disconsolately. "My uncle's a dear old boy; but he's married again—someone I don't much care for—and it will be pretty ghastly stuck in the old rectory at Bedbury. It's not a bad sort of place in its way; but it's not as if it were really my home; and I know jolly well I shan't hit it off with my new aunt."

"Why don't you come along to Brelland and stay with us for a bit?" Johnnie instantly suggested. "My

Digitized by Google

people are only too glad to see any pals of mine, and you've often promised to roll up, but never have. There'll be plenty of tennis and other things to do—that's the best of a fairly big house in the country decently close to London. I've got hordes of relations and cousins who descend on us at this time of year—a decent crowd, most of 'em, so you won't be dull."

Michael shook his head. "It's jolly good of you, Tubby," he said gratefully; "but I can't come at once. I might later on, perhaps."

"Why not now?"

"There's that cousin of mine. You know, the girl you've met once or twice."

Johnnie whistled softly. "Oh," he said with a grin, "you mean the pretty flapper, the girl you're so keen on?"

Michael looked sheepish. He felt rather diffident about discussing Diana even with so intimate a friend as Johnnie Barker.

"I'm rather fond of her," he admitted awkwardly. "She's such a deuced good sort. But the worst of it is she isn't a flapper any more."

"What difference does that make? I know heaps of girls with their hair up, and jolly good fun some of 'em are."

"I dare say," said Michael. "But when I knew Diana she'd lived at Bedbury all her life doing the rector's only daughter touch. Now her hair's up and she's been having a giddy old time gallivantin' all over the shop with a rich aunt of hers, going to dances and theatres, and all the rest of it."

"You mean she'll be spoilt, or blasé, or whatever it is you call it?" Johnnie asked.

"I dunno. She'll have met all sorts of other people, anyhow."

"What? And regard you as a back number, d'you mean?"

"I dunno," said Michael vaguely, though what his friend had said precisely expressed his opinion.

Digitized by Google

"I believe you're jealous, you old blighter!" Johnnie laughed. "Doesn't she take an interest in you any more? From the way she talked about you just before we left England it struck me she seemed to regard you as a ruddy marvel."

"I dunno," said Michael, lamely. "She may have liked me in a sort of a way, perhaps; but I'm not really a very exciting sort of bloke, you see."

"Darned few people are to themselves, old son," said his friend, with an air of great wisdom. "But tell me, d'you want to marry the girl?"

Michael thought for a moment. Actual marriage he had never really contemplated. All he knew was that he was fonder of Diana than anyone he had ever met.

"I dunno," he answered. "I suppose I do, in a sort of a way. But supposin' I asked her—— There'd be a frightful row and people would simply say I was a child and didn't know my own mind. Anyhow, if we did by any chance get engaged we'd have to wait for years before we got spliced. I can't marry on five bob a day, and couldn't ask her to be engaged if there was no chance of my ever having a bean beyond my pay, which is what it really comes to."

"Poor old man," said Johnnie sympathetically. "Is it as bad as all that?"

"It's pretty rotten," Michael said. "I can't afford to go buzzin' round London doing things and taking her to theatres. I haven't even got a suit of clothes fit to wear, and not a stiver in the world besides a fiver that I asked my uncle to send to meet me at Gib. That'll just about pay my beastly mess bill and fare home; and when it's gone I shall have to ask my old uncle for more. I shall hate doing that, though my governor will stump up eventually. My uncle's pretty hard up, poor old boy. It's putrid having one's father miles away in India," he went on with a touch of bitterness in his voice. "I'm a sort of lost sheep—no real home of my own. You can't understand what that feels like, Tubby. Your people

Digitized by Google

live in England and are pretty well off and give you everything you want. I hardly know my governor——"

"What you're driving at is that you can't ask your cousin to be engaged to you——"

"Of course I bloomin' well can't!" Michael interrupted. "There would be the devil to pay!"

"And at the same time you'd hate to see her snapped up by another man?" Johnnie persisted. "You wouldn't like her to take a fancy to someone else—someone who might be able to marry her almost at once?"

"Good heavens, no!" Michael exclaimed. "But I can't blame her if she does, that's the worst of it. But don't let's talk about it, Tubby. You'll swear you'll never tell a soul what I've been saying?"

"Need you ask?" Johnnie demanded, a little nettled. "Hang it all, Mike, we've been shipmates now for a good long time and I've never played you a dirty trick yet."

"No old man," said Michael affectionately patting him on the arm. "I know you haven't. I didn't mean I doubted you; but I should hate anyone to know that I was by way of being in—er—fond of a girl in that sort of way. I'd simply be jeered at. Diana's different to ordinary girls, though. I've lived in the same house with her ever since I was a small kid and—well, I feel as if I couldn't somehow get on without her."

"I understand, old chap," said Johnnie. "I'm sorry about it."

Since her father's remarriage earlier in the year Diana had certainly spent most of her time with her Aunt Margaret, and Aunt Margaret's husband was disgustingly rich. A mild, kind-hearted, fat little man with slightly bowed legs and a bald head, he rejoiced in the sole baptismal name of "Pooley" due to Heaven only knows what freakish fancy on the part of his parents. His surname was Green, and he had started life with practically no prospects as an apprentice to a tea firm

Digitized by Google

in the city of London, a fact of which he was inordinately proud.

From the very start Aunt Margaret had her husband completely under her capable thumb. Immersed in the details of his huge business, with all its ramifications, Uncle Pooley had little time to devote to anything else. His invariable reply when asked for his opinion on any matter of domestic policy was, "I leave it entirely to you, my love," with a little deprecatory gesture of his podgy hands.

So Aunt Margaret did everything—arranging the shooting parties, supervising the garden, engaging outdoor and indoor servants, signing all the cheques. Money was no object.

It was into this *ménage* of opulent prosperity that Diana seemed to have been welcomed, not merely as a niece, but as a daughter. Her letters to Michael had been full of the dances and theatres and functions she had been to and the people she had met. Diana and her cousin were even to have a "coming-out dance" and to be presented at Court.

"You've no idea of the clothes that Aunt M.'s bought me," she said in one of her letters to Michael. "I was horrified at the things she thought necessary. Their price was ghastly. She paid more for one evening dress than I should have spent in four years at Bedbury. I have over a dozen pairs of evening shoes alone, silk stockings galore, and a silk eiderdown, pale pink. Kitty's French maid does my hair and says it's '*ravissant*,' which will make you smile, and turns my bath on and puts bath salts in it. Aunt M. says I must be properly manicured because my nails and fingers are awful; but, thank goodness, I've escaped that up to date. There's a podgy old butler with three chins and a wheezy voice, and two footmen, and so many indoor females that I'm only just beginning to discover their names. Gardeners lurk behind every rose-bush.

Digitized by Google

" I am rapidly being transformed from a simple country mouse into a fashionable lady, and sometimes I get a bit sick of it. I long to climb a tree or to go paddling in the duck pond like we used to at Bedbury when Jenks wasn't on the prowl, and to get really muddy and dirty, just to see Aunt M's face. But if I did I'm afraid the old dear would tumble off her perch and cast me forth into outer darkness. She's very much the *grande dame*, but awfully kind to me. Kitty's a dear, too, and asks me all about you and wants to know if you've still got curly hair."

And though Diana's letters had not altered in the smallest degree in their frequency or expressions of affection, Michael had an idea at the back of his mind that he might find her changed—a grown-up young woman with a knowledge of things and people, perhaps a little conceited and blasé, with no time to waste upon so humble a person as an acting sub-lieutenant.

It was vexing. He had so longed to get home, and now that home was in sight he felt vague and uncertain and not a little forlorn.

Michael Bray — *Chapter XXIV*

THE " Hyperion " steamed on—past St. Catherine's and Ventnor and Sandown Bay, past the Nab light-vessel and the whitened buttress of Culver Cliff, until, coming in through the channel between the circular, chequer-sided Horse Sand fort and the red Warner lightship she turned up for the anchorage at Spithead. She was not to remain at Portsmouth for more than a few hours. She was a Chatham ship, and after disembarking the greater number of her passengers was under orders to proceed direct to the east country port to pay off.

It was hot and windless as only August can be, the

Digitized by Google

sky a brilliant blue dappled high overhead with feathery transparent cloud and hardly a ripple on the gleaming water. On one side, the Isle of Wight with the houses at Sea View and Ryde in the foreground and the green of the wooded slopes and fields looking invitingly cool in the heat. Away to starboard the yellow beach of Southsea dotted with bathing machines—behind, the spires of churches and public buildings, with the grey white, pale yellow and red of closely clustered houses blending mysteriously together in the quivering heat-haze. Beyond, in the dim distance on the skyline, was the blue hump of Portsdown Hill, and in the gap in the shore beyond the Spit fort which showed the entrance to Portsmouth harbour a glimpse of the old "Victory" and the training ship "St. Vincent" lying at their buoys. A thin smear of smoke, a tall chimney or two, and the gaunt summit of some giant sheer-legs alone betokened the presence of the busy dockyard. Nearer at hand a couple of brown-sailed barges drifted idly on the tide. Far away towards Cowes and Southampton the water was ruffled by a slight breeze and dotted with white-winged yachts.

The holiday season was in full swing. White-funnelled paddle-steamers scurried fussily here and there on their way to Ryde and Cowes and Southampton. A large excursion steamer heeled dangerously over with one paddle nearly submerged as her throng of trippers flocked over to one side to cheer and to wave hats and handkerchiefs as they passed the "Hyperion." A blaring band on board her broke into a popular song:

> It's the navy, the British Navy,
> That keeps our foes at bay.
> Our old song—"Britannia Rules the Waves"—
> We still can sing to-day . . .

There is always something rather thrilling in the sight of a man-of-war coming home from abroad with the long paying-off pendant trailing from her truck, and to the

Digitized by Google

greater number of people on board that steamer the spectacle of a cruiser approaching her anchorage was a complete novelty.

It was all so quiet and orderly and well organized. Save for the band playing on the quarter-deck, with their brazen instruments twinkling bravely in the sun, and the sing-song shout of the leadsmen in the chains calling the depth of water, the great hull rippled through the water in a silence which was impressive. The guard of marines in their red tunics fallen in motionless on the quarter-deck and the long lines of white-dressed seamen standing stock-still on the forecastle and in the battery amidships added a touch of pageantry. The excursionists, stirred and emotional, cheered and cheered again, drowning the efforts of their own band. They had heard a lot of their navy. Now they were seeing a little something of it at first hand.

"Fair dizzy, ain't they?" said a bluejacket on the cruiser's after shelter-deck, his sense of vanity tickled. "They're cheerin' us. Lawd! 'ark at them wimmen screechin'!"

His companion, a tall, thin man with a prominent Adam's apple, a perennial grievance, and a brown wrinkled face the colour of mahogany, permitted himself to smile. "Garn, Nutty," he grunted, "they isn't cheerin' us. They're cheerin' 'cos they wants to make a row. They'd cheer anythin' from a dawg fight to a circus! Them and their bloomin' bands!" he added in a tone of the bitterest contempt. "'Ark at 'em!"

"Shows they likes us all right," said the younger man. "Shows the navy's popular."

"Likes yer!" snorted his friend. "The navy's popular all right when there's a bloomin' war on and they wants matloes[1] and naval guns in South Africa and China—then they calls us blinkin' 'eroes and 'andy men and such-like. Other times we can ruddy well go to 'ell for all they cares!"

[1] "Matloes." Navalese for sailors. From the French "matelot."

Digitized by Google

"Go hon!" Nutty laughed. "You're up the pole[1] again, Bill. Your breakfast ain't agreed with you."

"Don't talk so wet!" growled the tall seaman. "We does our job the same as others and a darned sight better'n most, and we gets precious little money for doin' it. We don't get no bloomin' eight-hour day in the perishin' navy, and 'oo wants to be patted on the back and cheered at by the likes of them?" he demanded, waving a hand at the excursion steamer. "Any'ow, it makes me fair sick 'earin' us called 'andy little lads in navy blue!" he grumbled on. "If any bloomin' shore-loafin' civilian called me an 'andy man to me face I'd dot 'im one, s'welp me I would!" Had he not been tied by the bonds of discipline or fearful of the consequences he would have expectorated on the spotless deck to show his disgust.

"No, you wouldn't, Bill," laughed the other man. "If you met 'im in a public you'd touch 'im for a couple o' pints and call 'im a good chap—you mark my words."

"Ah, beer!" returned the morose one, sighing throatily, sucking his teeth and permitting a smile to creep across his wrinkled face. "I wasn't thinkin' o' beer. I 'aven't tasted beer since we left 'Ong-Kong, and then it was that Japanese chemical stuff wot's never smelt 'ops. Beer makes a difference, I'll grant 'yer—English beer, any'ow."

But in his heart of hearts even the disgruntled one was glad to be home again, and England looked typically joyous and homelike on this smiling August morning.

Bathing machines on crowded beaches—yachts and barges—paddle-steamers and bands and trippers drinking out of bottles and eating out of paper bags—that whole-hearted roar of welcoming cheers from hundreds of obviously Cockney throats—good old Pompey in the background.

Yes—the wanderers felt glad to be home again after three years of the East and its ghastly smells and yellow-skinned inhabitants.

[1] Up the pole, i.e. annoyed, irritated.

Digitized by Google

The " Hyperion " decreased speed and then stopped. The water boiled momentarily round her stern as her engines were reversed to check her way. Boatswain's pipes twittered and the long lines of men broke and scattered to their work. Then with a roar and a rattle of cable, the anchor found English ground.

A picquet-boat was hoisted out, and hardly had the captain left the ship in frock-coat and sword to pay his official visit to the commander-in-chief ashore than the " Ant," an ancient " flat-iron " gunboat, relic of a Russian war scare in the seventies but now relegated to the transport of libertymen from ships at Spithead, puffed laboriously alongside to take the Portsmouth supernumeraries and passengers ashore.

Piles of bulging bags and hammocks, sea-chests, officers' trunks, tin-cases and golf-clubs, not to speak of birds in cages, a monkey or two, Japanese tea-sets in flimsy crates, and many parcels and packages of " curios " beloved of sailors were already on deck. There followed a busy hour as they were transferred to the gunboat, and then the Portsmouth ratings, smiling all over their faces, were mustered and sent on board the " Ant." They were followed by the supernumerary officers, including no less than sixteen acting sub-lieutenants, Michael and Johnnie among them.

Bow- and stern-fasts were cast off, an engine-room gong tinkled, and in a chorus of shouted good-byes, nearly drowned by the groaning wheeze of the " Ant's " ancient horizontal engines, the gunboat circled round and pointed her blunt nose towards Portsmouth Harbour.

So slow and stately was her progress with the tide against her that an hour passed before she was negotiating the narrow entrance. Her gait was that of a funeral. Her passengers, eager to get ashore and to get away on leave, champed with undisguised impatience.

On she crawled, her engines clanking horribly—past the " St. Vincent " and " Victory," past the South Railway Jetty with a great battleship lying alongside, past the

Digitized by Google

dockyard and North Corner. It was an hour and a half after leaving the " Hyperion " that the busy " Ant " cautiously approached the " Asia pontoon " in Fountain Lake.

" There are my people ! " Johnnie Barker suddenly exclaimed in a voice shrill with excitement, waving to a group on the jetty. " My whole blessed family ! "

But Michael was far too agitated to heed him. Among the crowd on the jetty close beside a waiting cab he had caught sight of a short, stocky little figure in a panama hat and blue flannel suit. It was extraordinarily like Uncle Pooley.

It was Uncle Pooley !—Uncle Pooley, as well-covered and as red-faced as ever—and close beside him, standing stiff and erect like a grenadier on parade with her opened parasol at the slope was the voluminous and unmistakable person of Aunt Margaret. Michael could have recognized her at a hundred yards or more by the very way in which she stood.

And under Aunt Margaret's lee, like a slim destroyer under the convoy of a battleship, was a girl in a summer frock of flowered muslin with a touch of pale blue at the waist and a large floppy hat covered in flowers.

Diana ! It could only be her. She had come to meet him after all, and had dragged with her poor dear Aunt Margaret and Uncle Pooley. Michael was overjoyed.

He waved to attract her attention. She gazed at him for a moment and then, in sudden recognition, began to flutter a pair of long white gloves.

It was not the old Diana he had left over two and a half years before. It was Diana transformed, for instead of a tomboy girl in short skirts and flying hair he beheld a fashionably dressed young woman in a wonderful hat, with her limbs discreetly hidden in petticoats and a skirt which nearly swept the ground. She was taller than he had imagined her, and the putting up of her hair made her look older. But there was no mistaking her eagerness. She seemed pleased to see him. Her heart was

Digitized by Google

evidently the same, bless her! That was all that really mattered.

But in the few minutes of waiting until he could get ashore Michael found time to be pathetically ashamed of himself.

Here was Diana wonderfully and expensively turned out, evidently accustomed to everything that money could give her. And here was he, Michael Bray, with no more than one pound eight shillings and ninepence in his pocket and attired in the weird and wonderful handiwork of a Chinese tailor. It was of striped grey flannel, the coat absurdly tight and the elephantine trousers woefully abbreviated. And, where his bones had penetrated, the seat of those trousers had been laboriously darned by himself with worsted which did not match the material. It was the best suit he possessed and had been made eighteen months before, since when he had grown. He hoped fervently that his amateur handiwork in the nether garments would not show; but he was afraid it would. The coat was so deuced short.

His straw hat had been partially devoured by generation after generation of cockroaches. His brown boots, made by a Japanese bootmaker at Wei-hai-wei, had holes in their soles and gaped here and there where the stitching had burst. His socks were well ventilated, and his white *crêpe* shirt, washed by himself in the snotties' bathroom on board, was little better than a blouse. The tails had long since been removed for use as pocket-handkerchiefs.

Thank heaven, nobody could see his underclothes! They were utterly past redemption.

Diana would inevitably notice the deficiencies in his attire. Though amused, she would understand the reason and be sympathetic.

But Aunt Margaret. Lord! she would be inexpressibly shocked. Meticulously correct and proper, almost early-Victorian in her ideas, she could never be expected to see anything at all humorous in, to put it vulg arly

Digitized by Google

a rent in the seat of one's trousers. Uncle Pooley never had such a thing—dear me, no! He had presses and drawers full of trousers—trousers for every week in the year—and Aunt Margaret could not be expected to understand the hand-to-mouth, communal sort of existence enjoyed by a newly made acting sub returning from abroad: no money, no clothes, scarcely enough to eat.

But Michael had forgotten the sketchiness of his attire when, a few moments later, the "Ant" nudged the pontoon and, despite the warning shouts of someone in authority on the bridge, he leapt over her low gunwale on to the pontoon and ran up the broad gangway connecting it to the shore.

Elbowing his way through the waiting throng he made a bee-line for Diana, while the girl, leaving her escort, came towards him. They looked each other up and down as they approached, each wondering if the other had changed. Half shyly they shook hands . . . a cousinly kiss.

"Dear old Mike!" she said. "I am so glad to see you again. How you've grown!"

Michael murmured some commonplace remark in reply, while attempting unostentatiously to drape the mackintosh he carried to conceal his most patent sartorial deficiency. If only it had been a wet day he could have worn the beastly thing and have done with it!

"You've got thinner," Diana went on, eyeing him attentively. "What a sunburnt face you've got, and I do believe it's bristly. Oh, my dear! It's good to have you back again."

She was cool and fresh, grown up and utterly self-possessed—above all, adorably feminine, from the tips of her shoes to the summit of her flowery hat. There was a faint scent about her as though she had been wrapped in lavender, a fragrance utterly satisfying, wholly delightful.

He gazed at her in frank, boyish admiration, enjoying her prettiness. Her voice, the rippling way she laughed,

Digitized by Google

her eyes, dark like mountain pools in the shadow of her hat and fringed with their long lashes, were the same as ever. So was her mouth with its red lips and even white teeth, her pretty complexion and that fascinating *retroussé* nose of hers. Only her figure and her clothes had altered. She had blossomed into a graceful young woman, and the great mass of her golden-coppery hair was coiled up and almost hidden under her hat. Connoisseurs in the matter of feminine looks were wont to deny that Diana was strictly beautiful; but Michael was no connoisseur. To him she was entirely without blemish, wholly beautiful, the most lovely thing in all the world. He was under nineteen; but in that moment he realized that he loved her with all the strength of his young heart.

There was no time for further conversation, for Aunt Margaret with Uncle Pooley in tow was bearing rapidly down upon them, and Michael found himself clasped affectionately to his relative's expansive bosom and given a peck or two on the cheek. She was genuinely pleased to see him.

So, indeed, was Uncle Pooley, who, puffing a little as was his invariable habit and rocking his rotund little body slowly backwards and forwards between his toes and his heels, beamed benignly.

"Welcome to the returning warrior," he burbled kindly. "Glad to see you back, my boy—welcome home. You're coming to stay with us at Marlings for a bit," he went on. "Your Uncle James isn't—er—very well. We'll give you a good time, my boy—eh, what? Feed you up and all that sort of thing—eh? You'll have to tell us all your Chinese adventures."

"I'm sure he's been half starved," Diana put in.

"Rot!" Michael laughed. "It's the heat that's made me thin. It's a ripping idea my coming to stay at Marlings," he added, covertly eyeing his cousin. "It's jolly good of you to ask me. I'm afraid I'm rather badly off for clothes, though. This is my only decent

Digitized by Google

suit and the bags are bust in the seat. I mended 'em myself."

Diana squeaked with delight. "What a lovely idea!" she laughed. "Fancy you sitting solemnly down and mending the seat of your trousers. Did you darn them or put in a patch? Do let me have a look."

"Di—ana!" said her aunt, visibly shocked. "Really, dear, you mustn't talk like that. You don't know who may be listening. Pooley," she commanded, turning to her husband, "Michael must have a new suit before we take him home."

"New suit, my dear?" said the little man, his eyes twinkling. "Of course he shall have a new suit. Certainly, my dear—certainly. We'll see about it after we've had lunch. It will have to be ready-made, of course."

"Before lunch, Pooley," said the lady firmly. "I insist. We cannot take him to our hotel with a mend in the seat of his—er—hum-hums." She was far too polite to mention anything quite so blatant as "trousers."

Diana looked at Michael and winked.

"I'm afraid one suit's no good, Uncle," Michael said. "In my last letter from Father he said I could have a new kit. You see I'm on acting sub now, not a rotten snotty. I shall want three or four suits of plain clothes and a tail coat and dinner jacket and flannel breeches and shirts and socks and ties and shoes and collars and pyjamas and vests and—er—other things—the whole caboodle. I've grown out of everything I haven't lost or worn out."

"Bless the boy!" exclaimed his aunt, rather scandalized. "We must see to it, Pooley. Michael must be properly dressed. Positively, I insist."

"Very well, my dear—very well," said Uncle Pooley soothingly. "It shall be seen to. I'm sure," he added with a mischievous twinkle "—I'm sure I don't want Michael to have to go about naked."

"Pooley!" whispered his wife, horrified, "a joke's a joke, but really you sometimes go too far."

Digitized by Google

" All right, my dear—all right." He smiled sweetly. Uncle Pooley loved shocking his most proper wife.

Some twenty minutes later, with Michael's sea-chest, a battered tin-case and his small portmanteau piled on to the ancient four-wheeler, they were rumbling slowly through Portsmouth dockyard.

" Whatever is there in that great box of yours ? " Aunt Margaret asked, as they swayed precariously over the cobbles and railway lines. " It looked extremely heavy."

" My chest ? " said Michael, airily. " Oh, merely a few oddments I've collected. Curios mostly. We went to Shan-hai-kwan, you know, so I brought three fairly hefty bricks from the Great Wall of China——"

" Bricks ! " echoed his aunt, her eyes opening wide in amazement while Diana went off into a giggle. " Great Wall of China ! Bricks ! Why ever do you want to bring home bricks ? "

Truly the ways of young naval officers were peculiar. And what was the Great Wall of China, anyhow ? China was not the only country in which they had walls. For all the interest Aunt Margaret had in it Michael might just as well have brought home a shipload of sand from the Sahara desert.

" They're curios," Michael explained. " I didn't have to pay anything, either. They built the Great Wall thousands of years ago to keep the Tartars or someone out, and all the bricks are stamped with Chinese characters. They're jolly nice things to have. I'll give you one if you'd care for it, Aunt Margaret. They're a bit big and heavy to use as paperweights ; but I dare say you'll be able to find some use for it about the house."

" Er—thank you very much, Michael," said the lady, rather dubiously. " Are you sure you can spare it ? "

" Oh, yes, I brought it on purpose for you," he said mendaciously, remembering his aunt's collection of priceless old Oriental lacquer and china. " I knew you liked curios. Then I've got a Japanese tea-set I bought at Yokohama," he went on, " and a Chinese executioner's

Digitized by Google

sword with a notched blade and a couple of captured rifles from Tientsin which I took to pieces. There are some Chinese shell and fuses, too. One of them's a five-inch Krupp and weighs jolly nearly sixty pounds."

"No wonder the cab's creaking." Diana laughed.

"But are the shells quite safe?" Uncle Pooley demanded anxiously, mopping his face with a florid bandana handkerchief. "If your chest falls off the cab mightn't they explode?"

"They're as safe as houses," Michael reassured him. "I unloaded 'em myself."

There is no necessity to describe Michael's visit to a ready-made clothier, whence he emerged wearing a new flannel suit, a new hat, and carrying a large parcel of shirts, socks, and other haberdashery. Nor need we detail his arrival after lunch at the establishment of Messrs. Reeves, the naval outfitters on the Hard, where he was measured and airily gave an order for the full dress, cocked hat, scales,[1] sword, frock-coat, mess jacket, and other uniform appropriate to his new rank. He also ordered a quantity of plain clothes and other necessaries, so much so that his father in India, on receiving a bill for nearly one hundred and fifty pounds some months later, became firmer than ever in his conviction that the Royal Navy was anything but a cheap profession.

"Please remember to put the China ribbon on all my uniform coats," Michael said proudly to the assistant, rather for the benefit of Diana, who was standing by. "And—er—I shall want a miniature medal with the 'Relief of Pekin' clasp. You might send it to my home address."

At a time when medals were few and far between in the navy the possession of the precious crimson, yellow-edged

[1] Scales. The heavy gold shoulder straps worn in full dress by sub-lieutenants instead of the ordinary epaulettes with hanging bullion fringes worn by lieutenants and senior officers.

Digitized by Google

ribbon and the little miniature worn in mess dress tickled Michael's sense of vanity. Not many youths of his age wore these honourable badges of active service. But now he could cock a chest with the best of them.

Michael Bray — *Chapter XXV*

MARLINGS, Uncle Pooley's large country house in Surrey, a squat Georgian building of beautifully toned brick, complete with model farm and dairy, and set in the midst of its own park surrounded by a delightful garden, was as full as ever. The first evening after dinner, when the elder members of the house-party had settled down to bridge and the others were playing riotous cork-pool in the billiard-room, Michael and Diana wandered off together into the garden.

The warm summer night was redolent with the mingled scents of moist earth, mown lawns, and flowers. Somewhere far away in the village a dog barked incessantly, the sound mellowed by the distance. From the open windows of the billiard-room facing the terrace came the click of billiard balls and occasional bursts of laughter and conversation. In the wood two hundred yards away across the smooth lawn the fitful breeze rustling gently in the tree-tops sounded like ripples breaking on the seashore.

" Bow seven times and turn your money," said Diana, halting to look at the thin, lemon-coloured crescent of the new moon sailing serenely through a steel-blue sky dappled with stars. " What luck we didn't see him through glass."

Michael had often tried to imagine her in evening-dress ; but had never imagined her quite so attractive as this.

She was wearing a simple evening frock of some soft material with a thin chiffon scarf round her shoulders. All through dinner he had found difficulty in keeping his

Digitized by Google

eyes off her. He loved her neck and the glimpse of smooth white shoulders seen now for the first time. He loved—oh! everything about her. She was delicious.

Now, standing there looking at her slim figure silhouetted against the dark mass of the wood with the moonlight glinting in her hair, he could not restrain a little gasp of admiration. From a muscular young feminine creature with a healthy appetite she was transformed into something ethereal, something fragile and unearthly. His heart went out to her.

"A penny for your thoughts," she said, completing the ritual and turning towards him.

"I—I was wondering why you were so superstitious——" Michael laughed, coming down to earth again and jingling his money and bowing as ordered. "Do you really believe that all this business will bring us luck?"

"Goodness knows," she said. "But I've had some luck already, haven't I?"

"How d'you mean?"

"You've come back safely, Michael, dear. Suppose you'd been killed in China! I hated to think that you were fighting."

"Dear old girl," he said, finding her hand and giving it a little squeeze. "Did you really mind as much as all that?"

"Mind?" she answered, bending her left arm with her hand still clasped in his and pressing it to her side until Michael could feel the gentle throbbing of her heart. "Oh, my dear! Of course I minded—horribly! Didn't you know?"

"I thought—er—at least, I hoped you did," he said lamely. "I've thought an awful lot about you while I've been away," he went on. "But you're grown up now, Diana, and sometimes I rather thought I might be a back number."

"Oh, Mike! Surely you didn't think I'd ever forget you? After all, you've been like a brother to me ever since I can remember."

Digitized by Google

" I know," he said. " I always remembered that. I say, Diana," he added, " can't we go somewhere where we can talk decently? I've got such heaps I want to tell you."

" There's a seat in the rose-garden," she said.

Arm in arm they walked slowly off.

" This is perfectly ripping! " said Michael, five minutes later, shutting his eyes the better to enjoy the heavy scent which permeated the air. " This time last night we were at sea and I was walking up and down the quarter-deck before turning in. I was feeling rather mouldy."

" Mouldy," she said. " Why mouldy? "

" I was wondering if I was going to see much of you," he explained. " I half imagined I should have to spend my leave at Bedbury with Uncle James and—er—Jenks while you stayed with Aunt Margaret."

" You old silly! " she whispered, patting his hand. " Don't you know me better than that? Did you imagine I'd let you be handed over to the tender mercies of Jenks? My dear, you would have had a rotten time! "

" I hoped you wouldn't."

" I should think not, indeed! " she went on. " Oh, Mike, dear! Aunt Margaret's been a perfect dear, and so have Uncle P. and Kitty. I've had a gorgeous time; but it's not been nearly so nice as if I'd had you. After all, I know you awfully well."

She looked up at him and moved a little closer to settle her shoulder affectionately against his until he could feel stray wisps of her hair tickling his cheek and could smell the clean scent of it in his nostrils. His arm slid round her waist and his fingers played with hers.

" I've been simply counting the days until you arrived," she continued, with a little sigh of content. " And now you're here it's gorgeous—simply gorgeous! But it took nearly three weeks' hard work before I could make Aunt Margaret and Uncle P. say they'd come to meet you,

Digitized by Google

poor dears! They didn't really make up their minds until three days ago."

"Good on you," said Michael approvingly.

"Now tell me what you've been doing and all about Tientsin and Japan and all the places you've been to," she demanded. "I want to know everything, and don't leave out all the horrors."

She settled herself down to listen, while for perhaps twenty minutes Michael described the "Boreas's" commission and the fighting at Tientsin.

"Ugh!" she said with a little shudder of disgust. "It's dreadful to think that you saw all those men killed. Didn't you hate it?"

"It was pretty ghastly at first," he confessed. "Sometimes I felt I wanted to be sick; but later on I got sort of used to it. I couldn't help it. I saw so many beastly things in one way and another that I got sort of acclimatized. But I hate talking about it to you," he went on. "It seems like sacrilege. Dear old girl!" he added, pulling her closer until her head was on his shoulder. "It is so ripping to be with you again! I wonder if you know what you look like in that fluffy evening-dress."

"I see myself in a looking-glass sometimes." She laughed softly. "I'm just like dozens of other girls."

"Other girls! Good Lord, no! You're ripping—just adorable! There's nobody in the world like you. I don't know what I should do without you. I——"

"Funny old thing!" she whispered.

"I've been pretty miserable at times," Michael resumed after a pause. "I'm not much of a chap to look at, and no money or brains or anything of that sort. Sometimes I thought that—well, that you might have taken a fancy to someone."

"No—o," she said slowly. "Not in the way I think you mean."

"Sure, Diana?"

"Positive, my dear. You don't really think I'm the sort of person who——"

Digitized by Google

" Of course I don't," he interrupted. " It's merely the idea of it. I couldn't stand your being really fond of some beastly man. It's so difficult to tell you what I feel and what I really mean," he continued helplessly. " So jolly difficult."

" Why difficult ? " she whispered, raising her head to look at him. " Tell me, Michael. Do you think I don't know a little about it ? Haven't we known each other for ages ? Why, I know your old mind inside out." She looked at him, her eyes shining in the light of the pale moon. " Tell me, Mike," she urged. " Tell me."

" But it's so awfully hard," Michael wailed. " I suppose I'm a rotten sort of cad for even thinking of it. But I can't help thinking of it. I've tried not to ; but it sort of fills me and always crops up again."

Diana was softly stroking his fingers. " Why a cad ? " she asked. " I don't understand."

Michael hesitated, breathing a little faster than usual.

" I haven't a brass farthing to my name except five bob a day pay and a small allowance from Father."

" What's that got to do with it ? "

" Don't you see ? " he said. " Supposing I got fond of someone and wanted to marry them, I'd have to wait for years and years. Even then there would be the devil's own row."

Diana stiffened. She realized what Michael was driving at. Her feminine intuition told her what to expect next. She thought for a moment, wondering what to say, her heart beating fast.

" But supposing the person you wanted to marry didn't mind waiting and didn't care for all the rows in creation ? " she asked in a voice so small that she hardly recognized it as her own. " Suppose—only suppose—she'd already made up her own mind ? "

" I should still feel an awful cad," Michael persisted. " It wouldn't be fair on her. We'd be so jolly poor."

" It would all depend on the girl," she said softly, looking anywhere but in Michael's direction. " If she wanted

Digitized by Google

to wait, if she wanted to be poor with—with one particular someone, surely it would only be fair to give her the chance of refusing?"

"Honour bright?" he asked.

"Honour bright, Mike," she said, looking him in the eyes for a moment. "It's not nice to be poor like Daddy, of course, and lovely to be rich like Uncle P.; but when one's young one can scratch along on very little."

"What's the least one can marry on?" Michael asked.

"I don't know. I know a girl who married a curate and he doesn't get more than a hundred a year, though they must have a little extra, I should think. Anyhow, they can't afford a servant and have to pinch and screw and count every penny; but they're awfully happy. Look at Aunt Margaret herself. She practically ran away with Uncle P., and I know they had barely two hundred a year when they started."

"But I should feel such an awful brute if I monopolized a girl and spoilt her chances with other men. After all, Diana, I'm not much of a chap."

"Oh!" she cried with a little wriggle of impatience, "you're so dense, Mike! Supposing this mythical lady of yours wanted to be monopolized, as you call it? A girl is far more grown up than a man of the same age, and is far less likely to change her mind."

"How on earth do you know?"

"Because I'm a girl myself."

"D'you mean that you'd never change your mind—never get sick of a chap if you had to wait years and years before he could marry you?"

"Not if I was once fond of him in that sort of way and he went on being fond of me," she answered.

"Do you honestly mean that?"

"Mean it?" she repeated. "I'm sure of it. Two men have asked me to marry them," she went on. "They both had money; but I didn't care for either of them in the sort of way that I mean."

Digitized by Google

Michael did not immediately reply. How could he tell her what lay in his mind? Words seemed to fail him. He loved Diana—loved her with all his heart and soul—but he had never intended to go as far as this.

"Diana," he blurted out at last, holding her a little tighter, "we've known each other an awful long time."

"Yes, Mike."

"And I've discovered I can't get on without you. I should be miserable if you went out of my life."

"Are you quite sure—absolutely honestly certain?" she asked, hardly daring to look at him.

"Sure!" he burst out, summoning his courage. "Sure? Why, Diana, I'd do anything for you! I love you most frightfully badly; I can't tell you how much." The words came out with a rush.

"But you've got accustomed to me," she pointed out. "You haven't met very many girls, have you? Are you quite, quite sure you are fond of me in that sort of way?"

"I don't want to meet others now I've got you," he went on fiercely, pulling her roughly to him. "Darling girl! I'm a brute and a cad to ask you. I'm not nearly good enough; but I awfully want to—— I mean, do you think you could marry me some day? It will mean waiting the very deuce of a time. I know I oughtn't to ask; but could you, Diana? Could you?"

"I am so glad—so frightfully glad and happy," she answered softly, putting up her face and kissing him on the lips.

"Oh, Diana!"

"Yes, Mike," she continued. "Of course I'll marry you. I'll wait for years and years. You're the only person in the world for me, and I love you with everything that's in me. I think I have loved you ever since I can remember. My dear, my dear . . . my darling!" She spoke breathlessly, tremulously, for Michael, pulling her to him until she lay back in his arms was kissing her fiercely on the eyes and lips.

. . . . . .

Digitized by Google

" It's going to be jolly difficult," said Michael some time later, beginning to look at the thing in its true light. " We're both so awfully young, and there will be wigs on the green all round when people know."

Diana pondered.

" I think we'd better not say anything just at present," she said at last. " When we go to Bedbury later on I must start breaking it to Daddy by degrees."

" Hadn't I better write to him straight away ? " he asked. " I'll go and see him, if you like."

" No, no," she answered. " I must think it over."

" But I don't want them all to think I'm dishonourable," Michael said.

" We might see him together," Diana said. " But I must think it over—think what we're going to say."

" There'll be a ghastly row," said Michael despondently. " I bet they all want you to marry someone with money, and now I've butted in it will be hell for both of us. They'll probably send you abroad or something and we shan't be allowed to write or see each other."

Diana sighed.

" It's no good my pretending there won't be trouble," she said. " I know there will be. They'll say we're too young to know our own minds, especially you, Mike. And our being first cousins will make it all the worse."

" It's so deuced hard," Michael groaned pathetically. " It was our people who brought us together by sending me to Bedbury, so the whole thing's their own bally fault. I've always been fond of you ; but I never really knew I wanted to marry you until about a year ago. If we were just ordinary cousins and hadn't seen so much of each other things might have been different."

" I'm very glad they haven't been," Diana answered in a low voice. " I knew I wanted to marry you long before you ever thought of me in that sort of way. I think I loved you even when you were in the ' Britannia.' You were all I had to care for except Daddy," she added with a catch in her voice. " And he's different. I saw you

Digitized by Google

wanted someone to care for you, you poor boy. I couldn't help the other sort of feeling creeping in—I simply couldn't. It just came over me. I—I should have been miserable if I'd thought you hadn't cared a little. Oh, Mike, dear!" she went on, lying in his arms, "whatever are we to do? I feel so frightfully happy in one way; but in another I'm so awfully miserable. I know every one will be beastly about it and say we can't possibly know our own minds. They may say we're not ever to see each other again. I wish you were a little older and had pots of money!"

Michael strained her to him.

"Don't worry!" he said, with an assurance he did not feel. "We belong to each other now, and we'll stick to each other whatever happens. After all," he added, "if we've made up our minds nobody can really stop us in the long run."

"No—o, perhaps they can't," she sobbed. "But they can make themselves awfully objectionable. Even if we don't tell people for a long time Aunt Margaret or someone is bound to find out. We'd give ourselves away a hundred times a day."

"Suppose I tell Aunt Margaret outright," Michael suggested, "there'll be a flaring row; but if she sees I'm determined——"

"I never heard of anyone being determined with Aunt Margaret," said Diana with a pathetic little laugh. "My dear, she'd simply eat you! No, we must wait until I can sound Daddy. I don't know what will happen: I should think he'd have a heart attack on the strength of it. I rather doubt if it's ever occurred to him that I should want to marry anyone."

"I'll bet Aunt Margaret wants you to marry someone with money," said Michael miserably. "That's why she's been trotting you about and showing you off with Kitty. I shall be simply nowhere—a mere dog's body."

"And it's going to be harder for me than for you,

Digitized by Google

Mike. You've got your work. I've got nothing much to think about, nothing to take a real interest in except—except you! Mike, swear by all that's holy that you'll never stop loving me! Swear you'll never give me up!"

"I swear," he said solemnly. "I'll stick to you whatever happens. I'll fight tooth and nail for you, and if people see we're really determined they can't go on objecting for ever. If they do we must run away—that's all about it."

"Oh, Mike!" she whispered.

They were brave words, and Michael meant them; but in spite of his overwhelming joy at the thought of Diana's great love for him and his great love for her there was a miserable feeling of agony at the back of his mind. However much they might set their hearts upon a thing the opposition of parents and relations was not lightly to be passed over. It must be combated, combated strenuously, for opposition there certainly would be—fierce determined opposition—and bitter controversy, in which the parents and relations held all the most potent weapons. It was a hopeless state of affairs and impossible to see any real solution—rather like trying to batter one's way head first through a granite wall.

But it never occurred to Michael to regret what he had done.

Diana! She was the most sacred and precious thing in all the world. He loved her fiercely, almost madly, and she was his as he was hers. His whole life, his happiness, his eventual success or failure was dependent upon her. He valued her good opinion and her trust, she meant more to him than ever he could express in mere words.

He would guard her, shield her, protect her, worship her for ever and ever.

Digitized by Google

MICHAEL had not been a fortnight at Marlings before it was forced to his notice that Aunt Margaret's manner had become a little peculiar. Outwardly she was kindness itself, affectionate and anxious to keep him amused and happy; but constantly, when Diana and himself were together with her, he found his aunt's shrewd, questioning gaze fixed intently upon them. There was something brewing at the back of her mind. Evidently she suspected some sort of an understanding between them.

Lady Green had always been one of those strenuous hostesses who mapped out every moment of the day with occupations and amusements for her visitors. She had a passion for entertaining, and entertained everybody willy-nilly. Except in the fastnesses of their bedrooms no people in her house were ever really safe from her ministrations. There were shelves and shelves full of books in the glass-fronted mahogany book-cases in the library. They made a brave show in their expensive leather bindings; but nobody ever read them. Certainly no visitor was ever permitted to spend a couple of happy hours in their company. Aunt Margaret's own reading was confined to a rapid skim through "The Times" after lunch. She never opened a book, and, to her idea, to be found reading showed that one was dull or bored and had nothing better to do. One was dragged relentlessly from an arm-chair and forcibly entertained—golf, croquet, clock golf, bumble puppy, or, on wet days ping-pong in the old schoolroom, or some futile game on the billiard-table.

But now, so far as Michael and Diana were concerned,

Digitized by Google

she was more meticulous about her routine than ever. Moreover, busy as she was she still found time to keep a careful, almost prying, watch upon what they did, and contrived on every possible occasion, at tennis, at picnics, after dinner, even during the two-mile walk to church and back again on Sundays, to keep them apart.

They were not even suffered to escape the Sabbath after-church, pre-lunch ritual, when Aunt Margaret, armed with a basket of windfall apples and looking like a gigantic teetotum with her trailing skirt hoisted tightly up with elastic half-way between her knees and her waist, and Uncle Pooley, with his pockets filled with lump sugar, Indian corn, and broken dog-biscuit, which he offered indiscriminately to horses and birds and dogs, sallied forth with all their visitors in tow for a lengthy peregrination of the stables and farm buildings.

As sure as Michael proposed taking Diana for a walk or to shoot rabbits Aunt Margaret wanted her to arrange the flowers, to get up sides for clock golf, or to drive five miles into Melford in the pony cart with Kitty to change the library books.

Sometimes, though not often, by the exercise of a little ingenuity, they did manage to be together alone. But it was never for very long, and at the best it was an unsatisfactory, hole-and-corner way of discussing what lay uppermost in their hearts. Moreover, their more or less clandestine meetings were followed inevitably, if they had been out of her sight for more than a few minutes, by Aunt Margaret's "Well, my dears, and what have you been up to?" and something suspiciously like a cross-examination.

Michael hated it. There was something repugnant in having to be furtive in seeing Diana.

"I wish to goodness she'd leave us alone a bit," he complained bitterly. "She makes us do things the whole bally day and I never get a dog's chance of seeing you alone."

"She's doing all she can to prevent our being together,"

Digitized by Google

said Diana. "She knows we're fond of each other. She's been pumping Tony Masters into me for the last few days. He's coming here on Saturday to play in the cricket match against the village and stays over the week-end."

"And who the dickens is Tony Masters?" Michael demanded.

"Haven't you heard of the great Tony?" she asked in some surprise. "He's one of Aunt M.'s young men. One of her 'eligibles,' as Kitty calls them."

"Lord!" said Michael. "And what's his age and what does he do for a living?"

"He's between twenty-five and thirty and was in the yeomanry in South Africa, and nearly got the D.S.O. for being A.D.C. to a general. His father's a baronet and very well off, and Tony's the only son. I don't think he does anything much except hunt and shoot and play cricket and things like that."

"Sounds a bit of a snipe!" said Michael, in a tone of the bitterest contempt. "What's he look like?"

"Not bad-looking in a funny sort of way," she told him. "He's average height with a small moustache—— But you needn't be afraid I'm fond of him," she broke off, seeing the expression on Michael's face. "He's much too conceited and pleased with himself. He wears an eye-glass in the evening and thinks such a lot of his personal appearance. But Aunt M. adores him."

"D'you mean he's one of the men who wants to marry you?" the boy demanded. "Or is it Kitty?"

Diana reddened. "I'm afraid it's me," she said. "As you know, Kitty's fond of Reggie Sykes, and as Aunt M. approves I expect they'll be properly engaged before long."

"Lord!" Michael exploded, "I shall hate the sight of this beastly Tony! Does Aunt Margaret egg him on?"

"I think she encourages him," she said "Anyhow, she's always asking him here and she arranges things so that we see a good deal of each other."

Digitized by Google

"The pig dog!" Michael growled. "Why does he want to come pestering you when you don't want him?"

"Goodness knows!" said Diana, smiling at his vehemence. "I've told him I'll never marry him. I don't dislike him, really; but he will persist in writing to me sometimes, and when he's here will come buzzing round being attentive and giving me silly little bunches of roses which he expects me to wear at dinner. . . . Bah! I hate it! The worst of it is Aunt M.'s always dinning him into my ears," she went on, when Michael, with a face like a thunder-cloud, did not reply. "It's Tony this and Tony that. . . . Tony's such a wonderful cricketer and such a marvellous shot and has such pots of money and is so good-looking and so 'eminently eligible' . . . as if I cared! I know I'm an ungrateful little wretch to feel rather bitter towards Aunt M.," she added—"she's been so awfully kind and nice and generous; but sometimes I wish I'd never left Bedbury!"

"Confound Tony!" Michael exclaimed.

"You'll have to be polite to him if you're going to keep the right side of Aunt Margaret," the girl cautioned him. "He's one of the apples of her eye."

"You needn't fear," said Michael very viciously. "I'll be polite all right!"

It was the day before the arrival of Tony Masters that his aunt came upon Michael alone in the smoking-room hunting for cigarettes.

"Oh, you're here?" she said, peering in before coming into the room and closing the door behind her.

"I'm looking for something to smoke," he said. "Uncle Pooley said I might help myself."

"Yes; but there's something I rather want to discuss with you, Michael. It's been on my mind for some time."

"Really," said he brightly, but with his heart in his boots. "What is it?"

It was an unnecessary question. He knew full well what was coming.

"It's about Diana," said his aunt ominously, relapsing

Digitized by Google

into an arm-chair. "Sit down, Mike. I can't talk properly when you're walking about."

He seated himself on the edge of the sofa facing her and waited for what was to come next.

"I have an idea that Diana and you are fond of each other," she said. "I know you were brought up together as children and that you've corresponded while you were abroad. But since you've been here I've noticed certain little signs. I'm your dear mother's sister, dear boy, and don't think I'm being deliberately cruel and interfering, but——"

"Of course, I'm fond of Diana, if that's what you're thinking, Aunt Margaret," Michael interrupted. "I'm awfully fond of her!"

"But not too fond, I hope, Michael, dear," she continued. "I've seen you looking at each other. Diana always talks a great deal about you, too, and I can't help noticing how fond you are of each other's company. No, no," she resumed, waving a podgy hand as Michael strove to break in. "Don't interrupt me. I lose the thread of what I want to say—— When your Uncle James married again, your uncle and myself agreed that Diana should spend most of her time with us. She is a most attractive girl, and we saw that her life would be spoilt if she stayed on indefinitely at Bedbury with very few young people to meet and go about with. So we were quite firm about it—very firm—and pointed it out to your Uncle James. At last he consented. We wanted, you see, to give dear Diana a fair chance of doing the best for herself."

"She told me all that and I think it's jolly good of you," said Michael, as his aunt paused while trying to remember what to say next. She had rehearsed the whole conversation in her mind, but it was not developing at all as she had imagined.

"Not at all," she continued. "Not at all. We were merely doing our duty, dear boy—our duty to Diana's dear mother. We guessed that the life at Bedbury was not altogether congenial——"

Digitized by Google

" You're right there," Michael interjected. " We were both awfully fond of Uncle James, but——"

" I am going to take you into my confidence," his aunt went on without heeding the interruption. " Since Diana has been with us one or two most eligible young men have been strongly attracted by her. I need mention no names, but I have reason to believe that she has had offers—offers which many girls would have jumped at. She refused them. I wonder if you know why, Michael? "

" She—well—I suppose she couldn't marry a man she wasn't really fond of."

" She didn't give herself a chance of finding out," his aunt replied remorselessly. " If she allowed herself she might have fallen in love. As it was, her mind was fully occupied with somebody else. Perhaps you can guess who it is."

She paused and looked him straight in the eyes. Michael, feeling himself reddening, licked his dry lips. He felt supremely uncomfortable. Out of the tail of his eye he noticed his aunt regarding him with something suspiciously like a smile of triumph. He had given himself away—hopelessly.

" I'm an experienced woman, my dear boy—a woman of the world. I am very fond both of Diana and you. You are both my sisters' children, remember, and I don't want to seem cruel and heartless; but I've seen a great deal of life and a good many of these boy-and-girl love-affairs where young people have made hasty marriages with no thoughts for the future and no prospects. They have always ended in bitterly regretting it."

His aunt's attack was developing upon precisely the lines that Michael had thought it would.

" But do you regret it? " he demanded. " Didn't you run away with Uncle Pooley? "

" It is—er—true that we made a runaway match," she admitted, obviously a little flustered at Michael's onslaught; " but your Uncle Pooley is a most exceptional man, and most successful."

Digitized by Google

"But you hadn't any guarantee he'd be successful when you married him," Michael persisted, pursuing his temporary advantage.

His aunt, unable to think of any suitable reply, took another line.

"That is neither here nor there, Michael," she said, with asperity. "I neither wish nor intend to argue about something that took place many, many years ago and has nothing whatever to do with the case in point. We are discussing the relations between Diana and yourself."

"But if it was right for Uncle Pooley and you to be fond of each other, why shouldn't Diana and I——"

"Leave your uncle and me out of the argument altogether," Aunt Margaret retorted, not at all pleased. "What I wish to tell you is that neither Uncle James nor your father would ever countenance your being engaged to Diana."

Michael knew full well in his heart that neither Diana's father nor his own had ever been consulted in the matter. What Aunt Margaret really meant was that she herself was unwilling that her pet scheme for what she was pleased to call Diana's "successful match" should be spoilt by Michael.

"But I'm not a criminal!" he exclaimed. "I know I haven't much in the way of prospects or anything like that; but some day I shall be able to afford to marry on my pay, and if Diana wants to wait why shouldn't she?"

"My dear boy," said his aunt kindly, relenting a little and leaning forward to pat him on the knee. "I am merely pointing out to you what Diana's father and your own father would say. Your Uncle Pooley and I share this opinion. We cannot help seeing that a long engagement followed by an improvident marriage would not ensure your joint happiness. There is another thing—you are first cousins. Have you thought of that?"

Digitized by Google

" I know of other first cousins who've married and nothing's ever happened," said Michael miserably.

" I dare say, dear boy; but, believe me, it is unwise to run the risk—most unwise. It is not for me to forbid you to see as much of Diana as you like," she continued. " I cannot prevent your becoming engaged or married. But until you are both twenty-one, remember, you are bound to obey your parents' wishes. Unless your father gives his consent you cannot marry at all. You know that, don't you ? "

He nodded.

" Well, Michael, you are both young—too young really to know your own minds; and though these boy-and-girl affairs mean a great deal at the time, they are very soon forgotten. Is it quite impossible for Diana and yourself merely to be good friends ? "

" I couldn't be her good friend if she married someone else," Michael pointed out, very despondent. " I'm not built that way. Anyhow if Diana's too young to know her own mind why d'you want her to marry at all ? "

" I wish you wouldn't argue so," Aunt Margaret complained, leaning back with a sigh of impatience and putting a hand to her eyes. " It reminds me of your dear mother in one of her worst tantrums, and it does make my poor head ache so. Don't you understand I'm trying to do my best for you. I want to be kind——"

" And I want Diana ! " Michael burst out.

His aunt clicked her tongue.

" But does Diana really want you ? " she demanded.

" I think she does—in fact, I know she does," said Michael, with a jerk of his shoulders. " But what's the good of talking about it when you're—when everybody's so beastly unkind ! Diana and I have been brought up together. We've had each other practically all our lives, and now she's grown up we're to be dragged apart !

" How would you have liked it ? " he went on, beginning to lose control of himself. " If I had pots of money nobody would ever dream of dragging in the cousin

Digitized by Google

argument or the question of my age." His voice trembled. " Oh, Aunt Margaret! Can't you understand? Can't you see that we want each other more than anything else in the world? Can't you see? Can't you understand our point of view a little? Diana's all I've got. She's everything to me—absolutely everything! Oh!" he sobbed, bowing down to hide his face in his hands, " it's rotten—perfectly rotten!"

There was a moment's silence, during which he could hear Aunt Margaret's heavy breathing. Then the creaking of a chair and the soft rustle of her dress as she got up and stepped towards him. The sofa sagged as she sat down beside him, and the next moment he felt himself gathered like a child into her capable arms.

" There, there, Mike, dear," she said gently. " Don't be so distressed."

" But how can I help it?" he groaned. " You want to—to take her away from me. You w—want me to say I'll g—give her up and—expect me to be pleased about it! You won't be able to separate us, though!" he went on fiercely. " W—we're quite p—prepared to wait. If p—people are still beastly about it we can always r—run away with each other. Nobody can keep us under lock and key, thank G—God!"

" Hush, Michael, dear! Hush!" exclaimed his aunt, unutterably shocked at his invocation of the Deity. " Your language, my dear boy—really! Do understand that nobody wishes to be cruel to either of you. We are thinking entirely of what is best for dear Diana and yourself."

" A f—fat lot of good that is!" he retorted mutinously. " You are being cruel; b—but you won't see it! You're trying to persuade her to marry someone or other merely b—because he's got m—money!"

" It's not that, my dear boy. We should never, never try to persuade Diana to marry anyone she didn't love. But we cannot help feeling that it would be a good thing if she could fall in love with some nice man who could

Digitized by Google

give her a comfortable home and everything she's been accustomed to while she has been with us."

Michael shuddered at the idea. Though his aunt had mentioned no names he was certain that she was thinking of Tony Masters, damn him!

"Are you quite sure you are truly fond of Diana?" she resumed. "Perhaps it's only a passing fancy. You haven't met very many girls, and nothing would please us more than that when you are a little older you should find some nice, pretty girl with a little income of her own."

"It isn't a passing fancy," he retaliated. "I keep on telling you I've known Diana ever since we were kids! We know each other inside out. Outside ordinary friends and relations she's all I've ever had to care about. It's sort of grown and grown—— I've not been able to help it!"

Aunt Margaret's natural kindness suddenly surged uppermost. She was an impulsive, warm-hearted woman, genuinely fond of Michael, and hated to see anyone suffer. She began to think that perhaps she had gone a little too far. Though she had not talked the matter over with Diana, she knew instinctively and by observation where the girl's affections lay. Perhaps, after all, it was a little unfair and unwise to encourage the obstinacy of these two young things by thwarting them and putting obstacles in their way. If they were given their heads and allowed to see as much of each other as they liked they might eventually see the folly and risk of it, or tire of each other. Michael was very young: there was plenty of time for him to change his mind.

Nevertheless, Aunt Margaret was genuinely affected.

"My dear, dear boy," she said kindly, patting his shoulder, "I didn't realize you really cared for each other like this. I am beginning to think I am a silly, interfering old woman."

Michael looked up with something like hope clutching at his heart.

Digitized by Google

" Poor boy," she went on. " I always promised your dear mother I'd do what I could for you if anything happened to her. And I will now."

" But what will you do ? " asked Michael, brightening.

" I'll write to your Uncle James and to your father and explain things. They may not consent, of course, and in any case there will have to be conditions—conditions that neither of you will like ; but if you are truly and honestly fond of each other——" She hesitated.

" Well ? " Michael asked.

" If you are both of the same mind two or three years hence we must see what can be done."

" Oh, Aunt Margaret ! " Michael cried happily, hardly able to believe his good fortune and his aunt's sudden change of attitude, " you're a perfect darling ! "

" No," said she with a little sniff. " I think I'm a stupid old woman."

. . . . . .

But Aunt Margaret's letter to Uncle James was never written.

That same afternoon, just before tea, when Diana and Michael and some of the others were playing tennis, a footman came in search of Diana.

" Her Ladyship would like to speak to you in the library, miss," Michael heard the man say.

" Is it very important ? " she asked. " I'm in the middle of a game."

" I think it must be, miss. Her Ladyship knows you're playing tennis. Her Ladyship's had a telegram."

Diana, without a word, followed him into the house.

Five minutes passed and she did not return . . . a quarter of an hour.

" I'm going in to see what's up," said Michael, putting on his coat.

There were no signs of Diana anywhere ; but sitting at the writing-table in the smoking-room was Uncle Pooley. He looked very troubled.

Digitized by Google

" Sorry if I disturbed you," Michael said, halting by the door, racket in hand. " I'm looking for Diana. Have you seen her ? "

" Come in, Michael, and shut the door," said his uncle. " I'm afraid I've got very bad news."

" Bad news ! What ? "

" Your aunt has just had a telegram. Your Uncle James died this morning."

" Died ! " Michael exclaimed, aghast at the news and at what it would mean to Diana. " Dead ! But he seemed perfectly all right when he lunched here last week—full of beans, I thought ! "

" Yes, my dear boy. But your Uncle James has had a weak heart for a long time. Mercifully, there was no long illness. His death appears to have been very sudden and unexpected."

" And Diana—does she know ? "

Uncle Pooley nodded.

" Yes, poor girl," he said huskily, with a look of utter misery in his eyes. " Your aunt had to break it to her. They've gone upstairs. Poor child, she's nearly heart-broken ! "

There came an awkward pause.

" I was very fond of Uncle James," Michael murmured at last. " I was fond of Bedbury, too," he added with a far-away look in his eyes as he thought of the rambling old rectory and garden where he and Diana had spent so many happy hours together as children. " I wish I'd seen the old place again before he died. I know it all so well—so jolly well—every hole and corner of it. And now—it's all over and done with ! "

He sighed and abruptly left the room, his new-found happiness clouded by a great sorrow—sorrow at the thought of what this would mean to Diana.

There came the depressing day of Uncle James's funeral —the mournful family gathering at the rectory and the hushed conversation ; the coffin being carried downstairs ; the dismal drive to the church behind the flower-decked

Digitized by Google

hearse; the crowded church itself, its interior dank and airless, redolent with the odours of damp clothes, wet mackintoshes, and sodden umbrellas.

In the years afterwards Michael never forgot the last poignant scene by the graveside in the drizzling rain, with Diana in deep mourning, disdaining any umbrella, white-faced, misty-eyed, and with her head bowed, standing slim and tight-lipped with a bunch of white flowers in her hand as they prepared to lower the coffin.

"In the midst of life we are in death . . ." the priest intoned.

Diana's lips were trembling. . . . Michael looked away.

In the background was a sea of umbrellas sheltering a throng of friends and villagers—the men with bared, bowed heads, some of the women sobbing.

There were faces Michael had known since boyhood, dozens of them—kindly, simple country faces, men and women who had known and respected the rector and his family for years, who were not too proud to drop their old-fashioned curtsies or to touch their hats as Uncle James went by, or to stop and pass the time of day with the rectory children when they went abroad on their morning walks.

Bedbury was a conservative little village, old-fashioned, almost archaic in its traditions and ideas. Everybody knew everybody else's business, and even the arrival into this vale of woe of a new litter of pigs became a topic of public conversation. There was an old lady who still did a thriving trade as a herbalist; men and women who had grown up, married, and died without ever having been to London; several who prided themselves on never having been in anything so dangerous as a railway train.

Michael loved the little place with its people and associations. He was unhappy at the thought of some strange clergyman with his wife and a possible brood of children living in the rectory and desecrating all the old

Digitized by Google

haunts sacred to Diana and himself. Bedbury had been a home to him.

It was depressing to Michael to think that he had finished with Bedbury for ever. He supposed that Diana and himself would now make their homes with Aunt Margaret at Marlings and in London. Who would be the new rector at Bedbury? Would it be Mr. Burrowes, the curate, who had long been expecting preferment?

" . . . Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust . . . " the priest was solemnly saying.

The hollow thud and rattle of the little showers of gravel on the coffin-lid brought Michael from his reverie.

Diana was sobbing audibly.

Uncle Pooley sniffed and blew his nose.

Michael had seen men buried in the clean, open sea—a splash, a little eruption of bubbles, and it was all over.

But funerals ashore were ghastly things, he thought, gulping a little. The agony was so drawn out. For the life of him he could not help thinking of coffin-lids gradually collapsing under the weight of earth, of worms, and of hideous corruption.

Poor Diana! Poor old Jenks too. He had never liked her; but he felt sorry for her now.

Michael Bray — *Chapter XXVII*

MICHAEL spent two days at Bedbury with Mrs. Wallingworth and Diana sorting out those of his boyish belongings which he wished to keep. They were mostly rubbish; but all had their associations—a copy of " Masterman Ready " with Diana's sprawling signature on the fly-leaf, given to him on his ninth birthday; more books by G. A. Henty and Manville Fenn and Dr. Gordon Staples and W. H. G. Kingston acquired at Christmas and on birthdays; a couple of school prizes; his stamp collection; a model yacht rigged by himself with sails

Digitized by Google

made by Diana out of an old sheet; a broken air-gun; model steam engines in various stages of decrepitude; broken toys; a whole series of matchboxes filled with the grisly remains of beetles and butterflies—a hundred and one once-treasured possessions, pathetic little reminders of the days that had been.

Except at meals and for an occasional few minutes now and then Michael saw little of Diana, who was busy packing and making ready for removal. Even these brief snatches of her company were better than nothing; but he could not help feeling he was in the way, and for several reasons was not sorry when he returned to Marlings and departed thence for a fortnight's visit to Johnnie Barker's people at Brelland, in Hertfordshire, where he had a little shooting and met a riotous pack of Johnnie's young cousins.

The rest of his eight weeks' leave passed rapidly, and it was in the first week in October when, coming down to breakfast one morning at Marlings, he saw a long "On His Majesty's Service" envelope lying on the hall table with the letters. It bore the blue Admiralty stamp in the corner and was addressed to him. The printed bluish sheet inside with the gaps filled in with handwriting informed him curtly that their Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty had thought fit to appoint him acting sub-lieutenant of H.M.S. "Voyager" at Portland, and that he was to write forthwith to the commanding officer of that vessel acknowledging the fact and requesting instructions as to joining.

It came as something of a surprise, for Michael had understood that he would proceed direct to the Royal Naval College at Greenwich on the termination of his leave. But the fates willed it otherwise. For the time being the college was already filled with its quota of acting subs, and Michael, with many others, would have to wait a little. Sooner than leave the young officers kicking their heels in idleness ashore a fatherly Admiralty found them jobs.

Digitized by Google

Towards the end of 1902 masts and yards had not entirely vanished from the navy. The "Training Squadron," composed of masted corvettes, which went on foreign cruises and spent much of their time under sail, had been abolished; but attached to the boys' training ships at Plymouth, Portland, and Portsmouth were a number of sloops and brigs, sailing vessels pure and simple, which went to sea daily for the instruction of the young seamen in sailing-ship lore.

The "Voyager" was one of these, and was a barque-rigged sloop of less than a thousand tons, dating from the 'eighties. Her engines and boilers had been removed and the space thus obtained turned into accommodation for the boys under training, and punctually at nine o'clock, wind and weather permitting, she and her consorts—the "Wanderer" another sloop, and two shapely little brigs of a type which had been employed in the service in the forties—cast off from their buoys, made plain sail, and sailed out of harbour to spend until four o'clock in the afternoon exercising and drilling under sail. On Fridays they returned into harbour at noon, and spent Saturdays with holystones, sand, and canvas in "cleaning ship" according to the immemorial custom of the service. Sunday, so far as it could be, was a nominal day of rest and the boys were allowed ashore in the afternoon.

Michael spent only six weeks in the "Voyager" before he went on to Greenwich; but in that brief time learnt a little of the old-time navy and its smartness. They crossed royal and topgallant yards every morning and struck them at night; swayed aloft their topgallant masts and got them down again in quick time; made and shortened sail; shifted topsails and jib; reefed and set stunsails; hove to, tacked, and wore ship—went through every conceivable evolution that the ingenuity of the skipper could devise to make the boys under training smart and active aloft. Sometimes, when the wind failed, it was even a matter of "Out boats and tow" to get the ship back into harbour and to her buoy.

Digitized by Google

At first it was all very perplexing to Michael—bare-footed boys scampering aloft as though the devil, in the shape of a ship's corporal with his ever-ready cane, were after them; boys swaying precariously aloft on the thin foot-ropes beneath the yards; boys in the crosstrees; boys on deck rushing here, there, and everywhere under the supervision of their instructors, letting go some ropes, making fast others, tailing on to the topsail halliards, and stamping on the deck as they hoisted, while a small marine drummer with a fife distended his little apple cheeks in his shrill rendering of "The Cock of the North." It was the only tune that he really knew, poor imp! and it was not until he was promised a caning for neglect of duty in not perfecting his musical education that he essayed a tremulous rendering of "Rule Britannia."

But there was method in all the seeming confusion and rushing about. Nothing was done without a reason. The discipline was severe, almost harsh. Everything had to be done at the rush, and at the pipe "Clear lower deck," ship's corporals with their canes took station at the foot of the ladders leading from the lower deck and used their weapons in unmerciful encouragement. Such methods were illegal, but were winked at, as was also the use of the short lengths of knotted rope carried by the instructors wherewith to hasten the laggards.

Sometimes, though not very often, there were official canings on deck, where, in the sight of all the others, offenders were required to grasp a ringbolt firmly with their hands, and then, head downwards, received half a dozen or a dozen upon their tightly stretched posteriors. But nobody seemed really to mind. The victims, like Michael himself in his early days as a junior snotty in the gunroom, seemed to develop the unfeeling epidermis of armadillos. It was all part of the game.

The "Voyager" was commanded by a senior lieutenant who lived in state in his cabin under the poop and spent his nights ashore with his wife. The "first-lieutenant" was a fully fledged sub-lieutenant, a good seaman, but a

Digitized by Google

soured and morose individual with a considerable liking for the bottle and a penchant for pretty barmaids. Michael once went ashore with him; but only once. It was a Sunday, and Bayley's progress was far too bibacious and boisterous to be safe. Having looked upon the beer when it was very golden indeed he insisted upon conducting a Salvation Army band on the front at Weymouth, indulged in a heated altercation with the police when requested to desist and behave himself, and finished up the afternoon by forcibly dispossessing an infuriated cabman of his vehicle and driving it at full gallop through crowded streets to the railway station with Michael inside. How they ever got through that hectic afternoon without finding themselves in a cell at the police station Michael never discovered.

There was a navigator, a lieutenant, one of "The Hungry Hundred," [1] who hated all acting subs like the devil and never talked to them except on duty; but who luckily was engaged to be married and spent most of his spare time ashore. Also there was the surgeon, a good fellow enough, but who, after several glasses of port following dinner, became mournfully garrulous on the subject of his love-affairs, declaring that suicide was his only refuge. When nobody attempted to commiserate he was quite a normal person.

Next came Michael and another acting sub, a pious youth called Carthew, and, last but by no means least, a midshipman nicknamed "Sammy Slick," who had been in the third term in the "Britannia" when Michael was a "new," but had failed twice in his seamanship examination for the rank of lieutenant. He had been sent to the "Voyager" to give him another chance, but a less satisfactory mentor than Bayley it was impossible to imagine. Sammy Slick was an idle and a dissolute youth at the

[1] In 1898, owing to the shortage of lieutenants in the fleet, a hundred officers were brought into the service from the Royal Naval Reserve. They were known as "supplementary lieutenants," and jocularly called "The Hungry Hundred." A subsequent fifty officers enrolled from the same source were promptly nicknamed "The Famishing Fifty."

Digitized by Google

best of times, always in trouble. Under Bayley's expert guidance ashore he learnt a good many things which do not come strictly under the heading of " seamanship."

Outside the wardroom there were the boatswain and carpenter, the former a peppery little man of the old school with ginger whiskers, a red face, and a wonderful flow of invective when roused. He knew the ship, and all about her, from A to Z, and whenever Michael was officer of the watch and found it necessary to tack or to wear ship or to heave to, he found it useful to have Mr. Harper within whispering distance. Indeed, Heaven only knows what he would have done without him. Mr. Harper, on the other hand, regarded Michael with amused toleration mingled with contempt, in spite of his China medal.

" Mr. Bray's a little gent," he confided to his friend, the carpenter. " But 'e's one o' them noo-fangled breed wot don't know no more about sailorizin' than that blurry cat of ours ! Gawd ! 'E don't know the tops'l tie from the jib sheet ! "

In November came another packing up, a brief visit to Marlings, and Michael's arrival at Greenwich, where, in company with about sixteen other young gentlemen of his own age, he underwent a period of instruction in practical and theoret cal navigation and nautical astronomy, mathematics, trigonometry, mechanics and hydrostatics, physics, magnetism, electricity, nautical surveying, the use of instruments, steam, and French, preparatory to being examined in these subjects, which were grouped together under the general head of " Navigation." The list seemed terrifying enough; but the instruction was supposed only to be a résumé of what had already been taught in the " Britannia " and afterwards at sea.

The question of money was always rather serious. The college was not only the habitat of acting subs : Lieutenants qualifying for gunnery and torpedo duties also studied there, as well as budding marine officers, naval

Digitized by Google

instructors, and others. The mess—probably the finest and the largest naval mess in the world—was expensive after a gunroom. It had a wonderful collection of silver and kept a good table with a certain amount of state and ceremony. It was pleasant to live in it; but indubitably expensive to a youth with pay of no more than ninety pounds per annum.

Michael was allowed sixty pounds a year. Perhaps he was a little extravagant and rather too fond of cutting a dash in London, though on account of Diana's mourning he could not take her to theatres and dances. The facility with which cheques could be drawn, however, was too much for him, and his year's allowance was spent in something under three months. He had little or nothing to show for it. It was lucky he had a father who, comfortably well off and knowing the ways of youth, merely grumbled a little and came to his assistance.

It must not be thought that Michael did not enjoy his time at Greenwich. On the contrary, he enjoyed it very much, for besides being able to see a good deal of Diana, who, with her aunt and uncle, had migrated to the large London house in Gloucester Square for the winter, life in the college itself was not without its diversions.

The rules and regulations for the conduct and discipline of the younger officers were moderately strict. "Late nights," or absence after 10 p.m., were discouraged and could only be obtained after application. After this time the gate, guarded by police, was shut for the night, a book having to be signed before entry could be obtained.

But this did not prevent certain hilarious spirits from driving down from London in the small hours of the morning and scrambling perilously over the tall, spiked railings and so to bed. There was a spice of danger in thus running the gauntlet which was wholly delightful, for the police prowled about the grounds to prevent such unauthorized access.

Time and time again it was done with impunity, until one unfortunate slipped and found himself suspended

Digitized by Google

between wind and water with a spike through the seat of his trousers. He would willingly have sacrificed his nether garments to free himself, for his outfitter would gladly supply a new pair and put it down in the bill paid by his parent. But wriggle as he liked his attitude rendered it impossible.

Finally, in imminent danger of remaining there until the rising sun tinged the mist rolling in from the Thames, he was compelled to call for help. A policeman presently appeared and took the name of the delinquent, who, after offering and parting with his last half sovereign as a bribe for silence, was lifted down and suffered to retire to bed.

But the policeman was not so easily satisfied. He reported the matter to his sergeant, the sergeant to the inspector, the inspector to the commander of the college, and the commander to the captain; and two days later he of the damaged trousers was hailed up before the authorities for the crimes of breaking into the college and attempting to bribe the police.

"Gated for the rest of the session!" snapped the captain, having heard the evidence for the prosecution and what the culprit had to say, which was very little.

"Might I—er—may I have my ten shillings, sir?" the malefactor asked, anxious to save something out of the wreck.

"No, sir, you may not. You are so free with your money that I shall send it with your compliments to the Police Orphanage Fund!"

"I've split my ruddy breeches from clew to earring, they've pinched my last half jimmy and given it to their orphans, and gated me for the rest of the session!" the aggrieved one grumbled to his friends, expecting sympathy.

But no sympathy did he get—merely hoots of derisive merriment.

On going up for his examination in navigation Michael achieved a "three."

Digitized by Google

The pilotage course came next, followed by a visit to the Admiralty, where he was subjected to a lengthy examination touching his knowledge of the winds and currents of the terrestrial globe, the use of compasses and instruments, meteorology, chart work, buoyage, and general pilotage at the hands of four rather fierce and terrifying officers of the Hydrographic Department.

He really knew quite a lot; but overawed in their presence did not greatly distinguish himself, though, having read up the forecast in "The Times," he was able to discourse at some length as to what was likely to happen to the weather within the next four-and-twenty hours.

At Portsmouth, where Michael went to undergo his course in gunnery at Whale Island—H.M.S. "Excellent"—the acting subs were housed in the old Naval College, now the Navigation School, or "Wreckers' Retreat," as it is irreverently called, just inside the dockyard gates, where the captain of the "Excellent" also had his house. Here the discipline was much the same as at Greenwich, offenders being confined to the college or, if their offences were really bad, being "hulked" on board the old turret ship "Hero" at her buoy in the harbour and not permitted to land except for the daily instruction.

Each morning, after breakfast at eight o'clock, they hurried through the dockyard to the "Excellent" steps, where a steamboat was in waiting to take them to Whale Island. Punctually at nine o'clock all officers and men under instruction had to be fallen in on the gravel parade ground in companies under arms for half an hour's battalion or physical drill, the acting subs forming a company of their own. After this they broke off into their classes for the morning's work. There came an hour's break for lunch in the middle of the day, followed by two hours' instruction in the afternoon. At four o'clock they returned to the college and were free for the rest of the day.

Digitized by Google

It was a strenuous life. "Hattitude," as the bearded old petty officer gunnery instructor who took them in rifle and field exercise used to say—"hattitude, young gents, is the hart of gunnery."

And woe betide any unfortunate whose "hattitude," deportment, and general smartness at drill did not satisfy the instructor or the full-fledged gunnery lieutenants on the junior and senior staffs who, resplendent in gaiters, were constantly hovering round. It was not even permitted to laugh when the instructor solemnly recited the ritual of the funeral exercise, with its time-honoured, "Upon the corpse approachin' from the mortu-ary, ceme-tary, dead'ouse, or what-not, the hescort, restin' on their arms reversed, will assoom a harspect mournful but subdooed. For drill purposes, young gents, li'I will represent the corpse!"

Gunnery, as Michael speedily found, was by no means "all gas and gaiters," as he had rather been led to expect. It was interesting and he was kept hard at it—rifle and field exercise, field gun drill performed at the rush, cutlass and pistol exercise, drill with all sorts of weapons from twelve-inch guns to maxims. In the intervals there were lectures on gun construction, hydraulics, ammunition, fireworks—twenty-and-one other subjects pertaining to the noble art—and hectic mornings or afternoons spent in taking weapons of all sorts to pieces and putting them together again. It was a little difficult when the wily old instructor, having stripped a maxim gun of its interior economy, took everything to pieces, shook up all the intricate parts and screws in a bag, and then, abstracting one or two unseen, handed the mangled remains to someone to reassemble in five minutes.

But Michael enjoyed his gunnery course. Portsmouth, for one thing, was far better than Greenwich, for much of the work was practical and they were generally in the open air, added to which it was summer and after work there was always lawn tennis to be played at the officers' recreation ground.

Digitized by Google

In the end, on completing his course early in July, he obtained a " two." It might have been a " one " had not his examiner requested him to put a class of grinning subs through the drill for firing a *feu de joie*, about the only thing in the drill-book he knew nothing whatsoever about. It was taking rather an unfair advantage, he thought, so affecting not to hear he started off with the next best thing—the funeral exercise.

Michael Bray *Chapter XXVIII*

THE course of Michael's love-affair did not run at all smoothly. Within a few months of Uncle James's death, Aunt Margaret, now Diana's guardian, came to regret her previous attitude of conciliation and hardened her heart against any idea of an engagement or even an understanding. Michael's father, to whom both she and Michael had written, would have none of it.

" I most strongly deprecate any sort of understanding with your cousin Diana," Sir Julian had said in his answer to Michael. " I see that it is natural that you should be fond of her; but to my mind it is senseless folly for a boy of your age to wish to marry. Your career has not really started, and at a time when you should be working hard to get on you are thinking of other things. From what you tell me you have not passed your examinations up to date with any particular credit.

" Again, consider the question of money. For years you will not be earning enough to support a wife, and though I may be able in the future to increase your allowance to a hundred and twenty pounds a year, I could not give you more. This, with your pay and Diana's little income, would not be sufficient to maintain the pair of you in the way in which you would live,

Digitized by Google

for the upkeep of your kit, your mess bill in your ship, your wife's living expenses, your amusements, would all have to be met out of something under five hundred a year. To my mind you cannot do it, and if you had a child you would be little better than paupers. I do not say you are unduly extravagant, my dear boy; but at present you certainly seem to have little idea of the value of money.

"When you are twenty-one I cannot, of course, forbid your becoming engaged to be married if you are still of the same mind. Until that time, however, I do absolutely forbid it so far as you are concerned, for it is unfair both to Diana and yourself. I advise you to put her completely out of your mind and to stick to your work and get on. I have written to your aunt to this effect. Do not think, my dear Michael, that I want to be hard on you. I have seen the misery of a great many improvident marriages, and I do not wish to see it, above all things, in the case of my own son. What I am telling you is entirely for your own good."

The upshot was that early in the spring Diana, in spite of her protests, had been sent abroad for a year with some friends who were touring the Continent, both she and Michael being put upon their honour not to write to each other more than once a month.

It was an unhappy state of affairs which for a time made them both supremely miserable.

But, obstinate like his father, Michael was fully determined to marry Diana some day. He would have to wait for a year and a half until he was twenty-one. Looking back, eighteen months seemed as nothing; looking forward, an eternity. Even then he did not wish to go against the wishes of his father; but what was the alternative? To give up Diana altogether was unthinkable; he could never do it. No, he must go on with it, whatever it cost. But for the first time in his life there was a certain bitterness in his intolerant young heart

Digitized by Google

against his father, who, after all, was only acting for what he thought was the best.

Towards the end of July Michael—his gunnery course at Portsmouth finished—found himself appointed to H.M. Torpedo-boat "Number 209" for the annual summer manœuvres.

Michael would dearly have loved to have had a torpedo-boat of his own, for many acting subs who had obtained "ones" in pilotage were sent for the manœuvres in command of the old craft of this type built in the 'eighties. They were small vessels of about seventy tons displacement with a speed of seventeen to nineteen knots, manned by about fifteen men and carrying a couple of machine-guns and four small torpedo-tubes. They were small, unseaworthy craft, miserable to live in in bad weather, some of them with so-called "shovel-noses" containing an additional torpedo-tube which scooped up the water in the slightest popple and sent it flying aft in sheets of spray. Their living accommodation was very cramped, and their violent motion at sea brought qualms to the most hardened stomachs; but not all the discomfort in the world could mitigate the supreme joy of seeing the white pendant flying at the masthead of one's first command.

"Number 209," however, was not such an aged warhorse. She was only a year old, a single screw craft of two hundred tons with three torpedo-tubes, a couple of three-pounder guns, a speed of twenty-six knots, and a ship's company of thirty-two. She had a proper sloping turtle-back in the bows and a searchlight platform abaft it serving as a bridge, two funnels and a single short pole-mast—altogether a slender, sightly little ship of narrow beam compared to her length. She was commanded by a lieutenant qualifying for torpedo duties in the "Vernon"; Michael was "first-lieutenant," and the other two officers were a gunner and an artificer-engineer. The four of them lived in the little wardroom in the stern, with its four bunks along the

Digitized by Google

ship's side, with the usual drawers underneath and a narrow table in the centre past which it was just possible to squeeze when anyone was seated.

Commissioning over, provisions and charts drawn, and a box of kippers, another of eggs, and two cases of bottled beer embarked for the wardroom, they left Chatham and steamed gaily down the Medway to Sheerness. Here the ship was swung for the adjustment of compasses, sailing independently the same evening with orders to rendezvous at Milford Haven.

The weather down-Channel was fine, flat calm with hardly any wind. It was not until they rounded the Land's End and shaped course to the northward across the Bristol Channel, to find a heavy swell on the port bow, that Michael discovered that life in a torpedo-boat was not all beer and skittles. The way she rolled and wallowed, plunged and staggered, beggared description. To use a vulgar expression, she " rolled her guts out," so much so that even the skipper was overcome and retired to his bunk as limp and as pale as a pocket-handkerchief.

Milford Haven was reached in due course, and the rest of the flotilla arrived one by one and coaled. War between the inevitable " Red " and " Blue " was presently declared and for the next ten days the flotilla spent most of its time at sea, either patrolling outside, looking for hostile torpedo-boats, or being chased back into harbour by hostile destroyers.

Orders, instructions, and information as to " enemy " movements were still transmitted by land wire in cipher, for it was before the time of universal wireless. The absence of it, however, allowed considerable scope for the ingenuity and initiative of individual commanding officers. Once out of sight of a senior officer they were largely their own masters, and the manœuvres, particularly from the small ship point of view, were supremely exciting.

Destroyers or torpedo-boats, closing the " hostile "

Digitized by Google

coast after dark, would land armed parties in their dinghies to raid an enemy signal station, chasing out the occupants at the point of the bayonet, capturing confidential documents and ciphers, and bearing them off in triumph and attaching labels to all signalling apparatus, telephones, and telegraphic instruments to show that they were "destroyed." One energetic destroyer captain even made "prisoners" of the entire crew of a signal station, including the officer in pyjamas, and took them to sea with him.

One hectic night Michael's flotilla took part in a night-attack on Queenstown Harbour, when, steaming in full pelt in close formation with no lights and torpedo-tubes cleared away, they essayed to torpedo the ships inside. But the flaming of someone's funnel gave them away. Searchlight after searchlight blazed out and illuminated their headlong rush up harbour. The guns chimed in, firing blank ammunition, until the calm summer night became an inferno of rolling smoke and ruby gun-flashes, with the milky-white rays of the searchlights enveloping everything in a luminous, impenetrable haze.

The captain of "Number 209," leading his division, cursed volubly as they careered, for it was next to impossible to see.

"God!" he exclaimed, as they whipped past a fairway buoy perilously close and on the wrong side. "Ten knots, signalman, ten knots—tell the others! Keep your eyes skinned, Bray! Hard a-starboard, coxswain!" in a sudden howl of anguish, as the dark shadow of the land appeared right ahead and dangerously close. "Hard a-starboard, man! Give her full helm!"

"Helm's hard over, sir," came the quiet, comforting voice of the grizzled old petty officer from the steering position below. "She'll clear it all right, sir." This was not the first night-attack he had taken part in, nor yet the twenty-first. He had been in destroyers or torpedo-boats almost ever since they were invented.

Digitized by Google

The engine-room gongs clanged and "Number 209," followed one by one by her consorts, swung round.

"There's a ship over there on the starboard bow, sir!" whispered Michael, suddenly spotting the outlines of funnels and masts silhouetted against a patch of sky seen through a rift in the drifting smoke.

The cruiser, for such she was, was burning no searchlights and firing no guns the better to avoid detection, and steaming past at a distance of about two hundred yards the torpedo-boats fired their Very-lights to indicate that had it actually been the real thing their torpedoes would then have been fired.

"I claim to have torpedoed you!" shouted the skipper through a megaphone, turning and stopping close alongside.

"Rubbish!" answered a voice from the dark hull fifty yards away. "You're talking through your hat, my son. You've been under fire ever since entering the harbour. You were blown to blazes at least ten minutes ago! What ship is that?"

The captain told him.

"An umpire is on board here," came another hail after a brief pause. "He says you and your friends are all out of action, so you'd better return to your base. Good night!"

So back to Milford they went, to remain "out of action" for the brief period before the manœuvres terminated.

Although at times the weather was abominable and Michael, in company with many others, were marvellously seasick, he found there was a great fascination about life in a small ship. Since their work was so varied, and night so often was turned into day, there was a complete absence of any cut and dried routine. People kept watch, ate, slept if they could, washed their faces if they felt inclined, ate and went on watch again, and there was little or no time for any such things as polishing brasswork and scrubbing decks. It was a piratical life. Wet through more than half the time they generally

Digitized by Google

lived in sea-boots and oilskins. At sea the skipper himself wore an ancient pair of grey flannel trousers, and even in the finest weather mufflers were the fashion, instead of collars and ties Shaving, from the way the ship kicked about at all times, was utterly impossible at sea, and the captain grew a hideous beard, rather bald in parts. Michael, denied that luxury, suffered the few golden bristles on his upper lip and chin to sprout unmolested.

The gunner was mess caterer and the food was abominable and vilely cooked, which was not to be wondered at, seeing that the cook was a horny-handed old bluejacket with three good-conduct badges, more accustomed to laying aloft on the topsail yard in a gale of wind than presiding over the cooking pot sliding to and fro over the red-hot top of the minute stove in the galley. Boiled eggs were safe enough until they ran out, and so was the ubiquitous tinned salmon deluged in curry-powder or rolled into so-called fish-cakes with potatoes. But the nameless joints of beef, shrivelled and burnt beyond redemption, left one gasping—so did the manner in which the artificer-engineer, flooding his plate in Worcester sauce, managed to swallow slice after slice with the ship rolling her gunwales under.

Once, in the hope of buying fresh fish, they went alongside a smack on a calm day at sea, and the gunner, provident soul, bartered half a pound of navy tobacco for an enormous conger eel, which was hung on deck and used as required. They had fried conger for breakfast, stewed conger for lunch, and boiled conger for supper, day after day, until one night, when there was still half of it left, the skipper adroitly cut the noisome remains adrift and flung them overboard.

When they left Chatham they had a ham, suspended over the wardroom table for safety, from which anyone helped himself when he was hungry. Sometimes, lying in his bunk at nights, Michael watched it hitting the ceiling on either side as the ship rolled, until the once white

Digitized by Google

paint was thickly adorned with two greasy smears and the ham itself was a grisly mass, horrible to look at. But the wardroom at sea in bad weather was ever a nauseating sight—the floor littered with boots, oilskins, clothes, instruments, books, pipes, tobacco, the skipper's cigarettes, shaving brushes, bottles of hairwash and other debris hurled from drawers, cupboards, and shelves, swishing dismally to and fro in several inches of dirty water, which descended regularly down the hatch every time somebody came below. The crockery, kept in the minute pantry outside, was luckily of enamelled iron and unbreakable; but the awful rattling and jarring as the ship rolled and pitched and flung her screw out of water, the thud as things slid across the floor, the horrible atmosphere with all ports and hatch hermetically sealed, the snoring of the artificer-engineer in his bunk blissfully sleeping through it all with his mouth wide open, and, to cap it all, the gunner lying in his bunk trying to read a book and puffing out clouds of the rankest ship's tobacco from a wheezing pipe, often caused Michael to struggle into his oilskins in disgust and retreat to the upper deck. Here, at any rate, though there were green seas swishing across the low deck and the air was full of flying spray, the atmosphere was breathable.

Manœuvres over, they returned to Chatham, and presently, after a fortnight's leave, Michael, with a dozen or so other acting subs, was sent to Devonport to undergo his short course in torpedo, living in the Royal Naval Barracks and going on board the torpedo school ship "Defiance" each day for instruction. In October he went up for the examination and obtained a "two," and the same month, having completed all his courses and now a full-blown, confirmed sub-lieutenant, was appointed to H.M.S. "Sylph" of the Portsmouth Destroyer Flotilla.

At that time the main strength of the British Fleet was still concentrated in the Mediterranean. There

Digitized by Google

was a Channel squadron ;[1] but only twenty-four destroyers of the thirty and twenty-seven knot type were kept in full commission in the United Kingdom, eight at each of the three home ports. Regarded more or less as training flotillas, they made frequent cruises lasting a month or six weeks, and to give as many people as possible their term of service, the sub-lieutenants and many of the ratings stayed in them for no longer than six months.

Each flotilla was in charge of a commander, unofficially spoken of as "The Commodore," with a commander in another destroyer as second in command. The "Sylph" happened to be the ship of the second commander, and if Michael ever had any idea that he was in for the joys of a "pirate life" he was speedily disabused.

"Have you served in torpedo-craft before?" the "owner" asked him when he duly reported himself on board in frock-coat and sword.

Michael told him of his short experience in "Number 209."

"Well, I want none of your torpedo-boat tricks here, young man," the skipper said, smiling pleasantly. "No sea-boots unless the weather's really bad, no mufflers instead of collars. You're first-lieutenant, mind. I expect a clean ship and a smart one. It's up to you to see to it and to set a tone to the men. If you're in doubt or difficulty come to me."

The seven months Michael served with that particular officer stood him in excellent stead. His captain, who presently succeeded to the command of the flotilla, was kindness itself, an even-tempered little man with a great sense of humour and a merry twinkle in his eye. A strict disciplinarian and a born seaman, there was nothing about destroyers that he did not know, and Michael, woefully ignorant in most respects, always knew that he could turn to his commanding officer for

[1] The "Channel Squadron" became the "Channel Fleet" in 1903.

Digitized by Google

advice and help without being considered a nuisance and an ignoramus.

And the ship was kept clean and smart, her men contented and keen, her brightwork twinkling, her brown corticene decks as clean as scrubbing could make them, and her hull resplendent in successive coats of dull black. Her rails were painted aluminium colour, the woodwork and the insides of the boats scrubbed white with sand and canvas, guns rusted with vinegar and polished with linseed oil and much elbow grease to get the glossy "browning" effect so greatly sought after; living spaces were clean and tidy, lifebuoys enamelled black with the name of the ship in gold letters, the copper ventilating cowls round the after compass polished bright and others enamelled and fitted with brass rims.

The quarterly allowance of paint, cleaning materials, and the like provided by the Government were wholly insufficient for their needs. Some of the necessary surplus was paid for by the captain himself, who was blessed with private means, while Michael, as proud of the cleanliness and reputation of his ship as he was of his own personal appearance, sometimes spent more than he could afford upon her embellishment.

But he soon found there were other ways and means of obtaining drums of paint and enamel and varnish, coils of rope, coco-nut matting, canvas, and other miscellaneous little requirements in the way of brass, and so on.

For a considerable time they lay alongside Portsmouth dockyard, and dockyard "maties" and storekeepers, as was well known, had a great liking for ship's tobacco in the leaf. It was strictly against all regulations, and the police kept a vigilant and unsympathetic eye upon everything that went on; but sometimes, after a mysterious meeting in the "Sylph's" wardroom a dockyardman, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand and with a suspicious bulge in his coat pocket, might be seen to climb up the steep ladder leading to the quarterdeck and disappear shorewards with the remark that he

Digitized by Google

would " see what could be done." And of a certainty, a day or two later, a handcart, piled with all the articles Michael most earnestly wished for would appear on the jetty alongside. The transference of its miscellaneous contents to the " Sylph's " storerooms did not take long.

Thieving ? By no means ! They were merely stores drawn " for making good defects," as the consignment note made out for the benefit of the police most clearly showed. It is true that they were over and above the allowance prescribed by regulation ; but if the Government did not supply enough paint and et ceteras to keep the ship even tolerably decent, what else could be expected ?

Everybody, from the commander-in-chief down to the most junior sub of a destroyer, knew what went on. Was there not a story to the effect that the commander of one of the crack battleships in the Mediterranean, a real live baronet, inveigled several policemen from their places of duty by means best known to himself while his " side-party," provided with a duplicate key, removed most of the contents of the paint store and carried them off in triumph ?

Even Michael's own captain, whom he regarded as everything a smart naval officer should be, noticed the glossiness of the lifebuoys one Sunday morning as he went the rounds and turned to his " first-lieutenant " with a portentous wink.

" That's a good drop of black enamel and gold leaf, Bray," he said smilingly. " Did you buy it ? "

" N—no, sir," said Michael rather guiltily.

" Did you get 'em done by that old rogue Masters in the painter's department ? "

Michael was forced to admit that he had.

The skipper grunted. " I've known the old villain for ten years and he's never failed me once," he answered meaningly. " He's got the thirst of the devil, and would sell his mother for a tot of rum ! "

So far as her accommodation and seaworthiness went

Digitized by Google

the " Sylph " was a distinct advance on " Number 209." The captain had his own tiny cabin in the stern, while the other three officers—the engineer, gunner, and Michael himself—had bunks in the wardroom. The food, too, was good, for they had a proper steward who did the catering, and a " domestic," assisted in times of stress by a volunteer bluejacket, to wait at meals. At sea, too, there was not half the discomfort of a torpedo-boat, for the " Sylph " was a thirty knotter of nearly four hundred tons, quite a sizeable little ship.

During their cruises they were generally under way during the daytime and at anchor each night, except that once a week they carried out night exercises without lights. They visited Dover, Deal, Newhaven, Poole, Swanage, Portland, Torquay, Salcombe, Falmouth, and other places, so that Michael, besides increasing his knowledge of the British bluejacket and learning something of the duties of the second in command of a small ship, became thoroughly well acquainted with the pilotage of the south coast of England.

Sometimes they struck bad weather with all its attendant discomfort and misery. Once, in a heavy gale of wind off the Start, even the skipper himself admitted he was seasick.

The life was not without its excitements. One destroyer, leaving a dock at Dover, hit the wall at considerable speed and badly crumpled her bows, completing the business by going full speed astern in the narrow basin and damaging her delicate tail against the equally impervious masonry on the opposite side. There were two other collisions, and once, during a night-attack on Portsmouth, another destroyer, mistaking the entrance of the harbour in the glare of the searchlights, ran full tilt up the sloping wall at Haslar.

Ever since the first destroyers had been built in 1893 their tonnage, speed, and armament had all increased slightly, though their general type and characteristics remained much the same. Originally designed to hunt

Digitized by Google

down enemy torpedo-boats, or alternatively for making night-attacks upon hostile heavy ships in the vicinity of the coast, they were not intended for work in the open oceans with the fleet. When it was desired so to employ them they were found to be too small and too wet for use in really bad weather, and in 1902 and the following year had been laid down the first specimens of a new type of destroyers, known as the "River" class from the fact that they were all christened after rivers of the United Kingdom. Their speed was twenty-five knots, five knots less than the nominal speed of their predecessors; but they had a displacement of five hundred and fifty to six hundred tons and were built with high, upstanding forecastles instead of the low, turtle-backed bows of the twenty-seven and thirty knotters which drove through the sea instead of riding over it. Far drier in a seaway, they were also more habitable, mess-decks and officers' quarters being roomier with more headroom, and separate cabins being provided for each officer.

And great was Michael's pride and joy when, early the next year, the "Sylph" turned over to the "Tavy," a brand-new destroyer of the new class just out of the builders' hands. He was in her only for a couple of months; but, a great novelty, people flocked on board to see her, marvelling at her spaciousness and the unwonted luxury of separate cabins, envying her roomy bridge, her large forecastle, and the airy living quarters for the men.

"Of course she'll be a perfect devil to steer with that unsightly great lump of a forecastle," said her detractors. "Besides, you can only steam twenty-five to our thirty knots."

"Be blowed to you!" laughed Michael in a lordly way. "We can do our twenty-five in a sea in which you'll be staggering along at ten with the water coming green over your bridge and funnels. We never wear oilskins and sea-boots on our bridge," he went on, exaggerating a little. "It's as dry as a bone. And look at our

Digitized by Google

wardroom and cabins compared with your miserable dog-kennel of a place!"

After all, the "Tavy" was Michael's ship. He was her "first-lieutenant" and intensely proud and jealous of her. The British Navy might be the most wonderful in the world—certainly, in his view, the "Tavy" was the most wonderful vessel in it. That, after all, is the meaning of the term "esprit de corps."

Seven months in the "Sylph" and "Tavy" fixed Michael's determination to go in for the destroyer service later on as a lieutenant, for he knew he had not done well enough in his exams. to stand much chance of being selected to qualify as a specialist in gunnery or torpedo. Quite apart from the extra pay—"command money," and "hard-lying money" at the rate of one and sixpence per diem—he wanted to taste the mingled joy and responsibility of independent command, and to see his own white pendant streaming from the masthead of his own little ship.

And "destroying" was wholly delightful. There was something so fascinating in feeling the ship driven through the water at the speed of a railway train with the power of several thousand horses crammed into her slender hull, to feel her lifting and falling and sliding over the seas like a live thing, to feel the lash of the wind-flung spray on one's face. A big battleship or a cruiser, somehow, did not seem half so intimate and human. In a destroyer one lived at such close quarters with the sea that one knew its every mood and whim. One seemed almost to be part of it.

Michael Bray — *Chapter XXIX*

IT is necessary to digress a little from the story of Michael Bray to say something of the tremendous wave of development which swept over the British Navy during the first

Digitized by Google

few years of the twentieth century—changes not only in material, but also in the training of officers and men and the distribution of the fleet.

By about 1903 water-tube boilers had already showed their superiority over those of the old locomotive type and were in general use, and the year 1900 had seen the laying down of the first turbine vessels for the navy, the destroyers "Viper" and "Cobra." Both these vessels were lost in the following year—the first in August, by shipwreck off the Channel Islands in a thick fog during manœuvres, and the second in October, through breaking her back in heavy weather off the East Coast and foundering with serious loss of life.

Experiments with oil fuel started in 1900, and resulted, five years later, in the designing of the first destroyers fitted to burn oil fuel entirely. The heavy labour of coaling and stoking was thereby abolished, the number of men necessary in the stokeholds was reduced, and, weight for weight, oil provided a far more economical and efficient fuel than coal. A ship able to steam 1,800 miles on coal could travel no less than 3,000 on the same weight of oil fuel.

Wireless telegraphy was slowly being developed and was coming into its own. In 1896 its effective range was no more than forty yards. In 1903 a considerable stir was caused in naval circles by the battleship "Duncan" being able to maintain communication with England throughout her entire voyage to Gibraltar.

The first submarines in the Service, five in number, were completed in 1902, which year also saw the commencement of the new naval dockyard at Rosyth, on the Firth of Forth. At about the same time the "Training Squadron" of masted, sailing corvettes was done away with, and 1903 saw the final abolition of masts and yards seamanship in the paying off of the sailing sloops and brigs attached to the boys' training ships for instructional purposes.

In 1901 experiments had been tried for the purpose

Digitized by Google

of finding a more suitable colour for men-of-war than the time-honoured black hull, red waterline, white upperworks, and yellow masts and funnels. The colour finally selected was grey, the use of which became general in 1903. Destroyers and torpedo-boats still retained their dull black all over for the sake of invisibility at night, their colour being finally changed to grey after the battle of Jutland.

But December, 1902, saw the greatest and most far-reaching change of all in the introduction of a new scheme for the entry and training of officers. In future, all officers, with the exception of those of the medical and accountant branches, were to enter the Service together and undergo the same training. They were to spend two years at the college at Osborne, followed by two years at Dartmouth and nine months in a training cruiser, after which they were to be drafted to sea-going ships as midshipmen. On reaching the rank of lieutenant they would be selected to specialize in gunnery, torpedo, navigation, engineering, or as marine or instructional officers. This scheme, which in its main outline, has remained in force until the present day, entailed the gradual replacement of the old line of engineer officers entering the navy through the Royal Naval Engineering College at Keyham, and the abolition of the training in the old "Britannia." The first examination under the new regulations took place in July, 1903, and at the end of the summer term of 1905 the final batch of cadets passed out of the "Britannia" and went to sea. The famous old ship, however, still remained at her moorings for some years as part of the training establishment at Dartmouth, her name being taken by a battleship launched in 1904.

The year 1903 saw the first formation of the civilian Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, and the utilization of Royal Naval Barracks at Portsmouth, Chatham, and Devonport as depots instead of the old hulks. At the same time the dietary throughout the navy was greatly

Digitized by Google

improved, the number of meals being increased, jam, condensed milk, and other articles being introduced, and sailors being provided with knives and forks for the first time in their history. The seamen, intensely conservative in their ideas and steeped in tradition, regarded the innovations for their comfort and well-being with the deepest suspicion and disfavour. Regardless of the fact that the new rations cost the country several hundreds of thousands of pounds per annum, many were convinced that they were being foisted off with condemned army stores left over after the campaign in South Africa. At much the same time the numbers of reservists were increased by the introduction of a " short service system," whereby men entered the navy and served for five years afloat followed by seven years in the fleet reserve, instead of the usual twelve years afloat. And the jam and condensed milk, said the wise-acres, were introduced purposely to encourage these men to join. A firm called Messrs. Tickler made a considerable proportion of the jam, and very excellent jam it was. But throughout the Service the short service men were popularly known as " Ticklers."

Other branches of the reserves were also reorganized, while, for the first time, fishermen and other non-naval seamen belonging to the Royal Naval Reserve received their periodical drill afloat in men-of-war instead of in batteries ashore.

In 1903–1904 the newest battleships completed were the six vessels of the " Duncan " class, costing slightly over one million sterling each. They were virtual improvements on, and carried similar armaments to, the nine " Majestics," completed between 1895 and 1898 and costing each some £100,000 less. The most recent armoured cruisers were those of the three-funnelled " County " class, ships of 9,800 tons, of twenty-one to twenty-three knots' speed, armed with fourteen six-inch guns and each costing about three-quarters of a million. The most powerful ships of the armoured

Digitized by Google

cruiser type, however, were the four "Drakes," four-funnellers of 14,100 tons, armed with two 9.2-inch and sixteen six-inch guns. For some time these last named remained the fastest men-of-war at sea, the "King Alfred" having attained what was then considered the extraordinary speed of twenty-five knots.

In 1903 British vessels of war were seldom seen in the North Sea. Eight battleships of the "Channel Fleet" were in full commission at home, four battleships were in China, and fourteen in the Mediterranean, to which station the newest vessels were generally sent on completion.

Improvements had been made in guns and torpedoes, and the shooting throughout the navy had improved, though as yet there was no standardized system of fire control or really long-range target practice.

On the night of February 8th to 9th, 1904, Japanese destroyers were sent in to attack the Russian fleet lying in the open roadstead before Port Arthur with their lights burning. The Russo-Japanese war was to show, above all things, the fate of a fleet superior in numbers, but badly trained, ill-organized, and with indifferent personnel, at the hands of the inferior navy of a despised but more virile enemy with well-trained, scientific, and highly disciplined officers and men.

And British naval officers, together with a chosen few of the more enlightened British public, were beginning to realize with some concern that a storm was brewing on the eastern coast of the North Sea.

At the end of 1895 had come the Jameson Raid and the Kaiser's bombastic telegram to President Kruger. It had been followed by the immediate commissioning of a British "Flying Squadron," headed by the new battleship "Revenge." The commissioning of this squadron caused Germany to realize her utter impotence at sea, and in 1898 to bring in her first Navy Act strengthening the German fleet.

Digitized by Google

In 1899 came the South African War, when Germany, debarred from encroaching on South America on account of the Monroe Doctrine, saw her aspirations in the Transvaal and Orange Free State nipped in the bud. With decided pro-Boer sympathies, she was forced to remain a passive spectator of the struggle, and to watch British transports proceeding to and fro from the Cape without thought of peril owing to the overwhelming British superiority at sea. Then came the episode of the German steamer "Bundesrath," which was stopped by a British man-of-war on suspicion of carrying contraband munitions to the Boers. The incident provided excellent material for propaganda. A wave of patriotic enthusiasm swept over the Teutonic Empire, and the year 1900 saw the passing of a new Navy Act practically doubling the strength of the fleet.

And as yet the flower of the British fleet was still stationed in the Mediterranean, the standards of training afloat had not been modernized, while fully half the available ships were left unmanned in peace in the quiet seclusion of the dockyards.

Moreover, in the uttermost parts of the world—in the Pacific, the South Atlantic, the East Indies, and China and elsewhere, were numbers of old non-fighting vessels flying the White Ensign—some of them slow cruisers of old type, others unseaworthy sloops and gunboats—vessels too weak to fight, too slow to run away. Doubtless they were doing valuable work in showing the flag; but of a certainty they cost a prodigious sum in their maintenance and absorbed a large proportion of the valuable personnel.

The principle upon which the ships and fleets of the British Navy were distributed throughout the seven seas, indeed, dated from a period before the invention of submarine cables and electric telegraphs, from an epoch when wind was still the controlling motive power.

Sailing ships had passed away as useless for war purposes. In the light of modern conditions such

Digitized by Google

time-honoured weapons as spar-torpedoes, rams, boarding pikes, and tomahawks, together with target practice carried out at distances little more than the effective gun range at the battle of Trafalgar, were hopelessly obsolete. The age of long-range gunfire, of fast torpedo-craft, of wireless telegraphy, of oil fuel and water-tube boilers and high speed turbines was setting in. Every new development necessitated specialized training on the part of the personnel, and ships had become mazes of complicated machinery and weapons and appliances which required a deal of understanding for their efficient use. The old-time sailing ship officers, and sailormen used to scampering about loft and reefing topsails in a gale of wind, were dying out. In their stead had sprung up a new breed of men—scientific seamen-engineers skilled in the use of machinery and guns and torpedoes, but still wearing the same old uniform, still carrying on the gallant old tradition of their forbears.

On the other side of the North Sea a Teutonic Michael was becoming a powerful competitor for the trident of Britannia. A change in the organization and distribution of the British Fleet with a view to its instant preparedness for war was vitally necessary. The hour for reform had struck, and with the arrival of Sir John Fisher at the Admiralty as First Sea Lord, in 1904, reform duly came.

A glance at the " Navy List " of 1900 shows the multiplicity of the types and nomenclature of vessels of war. There were battleships of the first, second, and third classes; coast defence ironclads; first class armoured cruisers; first class protected cruisers; second and third class cruisers; first, second, and third class gunboats; torpedo-boat destroyers and torpedo-boats; a torpedo ram; sloops and river gunboats—many of them hopelessly obsolete and armed with weapons of a bygone age.

In 1904 a committee under the presidency of Sir John Fisher sat at the Admiralty to decide what types of vessels the navy really required instead of the curiously

Digitized by Google

assorted menagerie appearing in the Navy List. In due course the committee reported that the following types were desirable: first, well protected battleships of about twenty-one knots' speed carrying the greatest possible number of heavy guns on a moderate displacement; second, faster battleships—subsequently known as battle-cruisers—carrying a smaller number of the heaviest guns and with a speed of twenty-five knots or more and somewhat less armour protection; third, fast scout cruisers of twenty-five knots or more, armed with medium-sized guns and suitable either for work with the battle squadrons or for service abroad; fourth, large destroyers of great seaworthiness and the highest possible speed, with fuel sufficient to enable them to make long ocean passages; fifth, destroyers of smaller type for coastal defence, subsequently classified as torpedo-boats and now obsolete; and sixth, fast, seaworthy submarines.

Thus started what is popularly known as the "Dreadnought era," the battleship "Dreadnought" herself being laid down on October 2nd, 1905, launched the following February, and commissioned in December, 1906, this providing a record in the biilding of a large man-of-war. This epoch-making ship was of 18,000 tons with a speed of twenty-one knots, and was driven by turbines. She mounted ten twelve-inch guns instead of the mixed armaments of twelve-inch, 9.2-inch, and six-inch weapons of her predecessors, and carried a certain amount of oil-fuel in addition to her coal. For the first time in the history of the navy, also, the accommodation for the officers was in the fore-part of the ship, while the men lived aft, a practice which, however, was abandoned in the course of a few years.

In creating a type of battleship so immensely superior to anything that had gone before, the Admiralty made up for all arrears of armoured shipbuilding by evolving a new basis of naval strength. Moreover, as the details of the new ships were kept a profound secret they obtained

Digitized by Google

a start of eighteen months. The "Dreadnought" injuriously affected seven battleships under construction for the British Navy; but relegated to the background no less than forty-one ships of the old type under construction for the seven other great naval powers. Foreign Admiralties were paralysed for the time and the building of heavy ships ceased. By one stroke of policy the British Fleet had regained its traditional supremacy, which it was in serious danger of losing.

At about the same period other far-reaching organization was carried out. At the end of 1904 all the slow cruisers, sloops, and gunboats were ordered to be withdrawn from abroad, and one hundred and sixty-three non-effective vessels were struck off the list and sold out of the Service by degrees. At the same time the principal battle squadrons, with their complementary cruisers, light cruisers, and destroyers were concentrated in home waters under the generic title of the "Home Fleet."

The newest ships, or "First Fleet," were maintained in permanent full commission. Older, but still battleworthy, vessels formed a "Second Fleet" manned with "nucleus crews," which meant that each vessel was provided with her captain and the more important officers and two-fifths of her ordinary war complement, which included all the necessary highly skilled ratings. The balance of the officers and men was immediately forthcoming from the barracks and instructional establishments at the home ports if required, so that the vessels could be fully manned at any time without encroaching on the reserves, which could only be called out by Royal Proclamation. The Second Fleet, moreover, was to carry out periodical exercises at sea, and thus was abolished the old system whereby officers and crews were hastily sent on board strange vessels on mobilization—a system which did not permit the ships to be immediately efficient as fighting units, and risked their incurring machinery mishaps and breakdowns at sea on first commissioning.

Digitized by Google

The " Third Fleet " consisted of obsolescent but still useful vessels manned in peace by skeleton crews, and intended to be brought up to full strength on mobilization by utilizing the reserves.

Abroad, squadrons of modern cruisers still showed the flag, while at home patrol flotillas of destroyers, torpedo-boats, and submarines manned with nucleus crews in peace were organized for the defence of the vulnerable East Coast.

During the same period a Navigation School was opened at the old Royal Naval College at Portsmouth for the better instruction and training of officers employed for navigating duties; Signal Schools were opened at the three home ports, and War Courses for senior officers were inaugurated at the War College at Portsmouth. The question of the supply of naval stores and fuel was gone into and perfected, and the shipbuilding appliances at the Royal dockyards brought into line with modern requirements.

In the year 1900, when target practice with all guns was carried out at ranges of 2,000 yards and less, the percentage of hits to misses was thirty-two. A system of fire control, and battle practice at ranges of 8,000 to 10,000 yards, was instituted in 1905. By 1907 the shooting of the navy as a whole had so far improved that the average hits throughout the service were seventy-nine per cent of the rounds fired.

The Royal Navy of Great Britain, the sure shield of the Empire in the hour of its need, had again come into its own.

The day of the ram, the boarding pike, and the tomahawk had passed for ever.

Michael Bray — *Chapter XXX*

It was in May that Michael joined the " Sussex " at Devonport. His new ship was one of the recently built

Digitized by Google

"County" class cruisers belonging to what was known as the "Cruiser Squadron," and though still a sub-lieutenant and entitled to no more in the way of accommodation for himself and his possessions than a hammock and sea-chest, he found himself in occupation of a cabin —a blessed boon. Moreover, as there were no midshipmen, Michael and the other gunroom commissioned officers lived and messed in the wardroom.

In the "Sylph," Michael, as "first-lieutenant," had been in the position of having what was practically his own way in regard to the running of the ship and her internal economy, subject, of course, to the general supervision of the commanding officer, who, however, seldom interfered unless things went wrong. In the "Sussex," however, he was no longer prime minister of a little kingdom, but an inferior official in a vastly greater one. He was practically the junior commissioned officer on board, a person of small importance, with the commander and first-lieutenant, besides the gunnery, torpedo, and navigating lieutenants and several watchkeepers, all set in authority over him. As such he had to adjust his ideas and conduct himself with due humility and obedience.

But the "Sussex" was a very happy ship, and, junior and inexperienced though he was, Michael was treated by the other officers as one of themselves. They were a merry crew, and, during riotous sing-songs after dinner, cheerfully sat on each other's faces and tore the clothes off each other's backs just as if they had been midshipmen in the gunroom.

Michael's work, too, was something quite fresh and novel. Keeping four watches in harbour, he had his fair share of perambulating the quarter-deck in frock-coat and sword-belt, with a telescope under his arm, seeing that the routine was duly carried out, boats called away and sent ashore at their stated time, guards paraded whenever admirals passed in their barges with their flags flying, and visitors of rank received with due solemnity. There

Digitized by Google

was a considerable amount of ritual to be learnt and thoroughly digested—which officers should be piped over the side and which should not, in what circumstances the guard of marines should be paraded, the details of the ceremonial for hoisting the colours in the morning and hauling them down at sundown, what to do if a liberty-man returned on board drunk, and the exact Service definitions of "drunk" and "sober." There were a hundred and one little things in which he might go wrong, and often he had to seek the advice of others more experienced than himself.

He was allowed, after satisfying the captain and navigator as to his competence, to keep regular watch at sea, while, under the first-lieutenant, he had charge of the boys' division and was responsible for mustering their kits and arranging their drill and instruction. He also found himself in charge of the fore-turret with its pair of six-inch guns on their single mounting designed to be fired simultaneously, a fearsome and complicated arrangement which caused him much tribulation and frequently went wrong at critical moments. He also had to learn up his small-arm drill, for the third day he joined he found himself in charge of a company of seamen ashore under arms. There was a great deal to be assimilated in one way and another, and it was some time before the strangeness of it all wore off and he found himself even passably proficient in his new duties.

Michael soon found that if he was to satisfy his new commanding officer he would have to keep his eyes skinned and his wits about him. Indeed, the very morning after joining, when he was summoned into the presence of Captain Sprott to be "vetted," he left the great man's presence in no happy frame of mind and with a remarkably poor opinion of himself.

The captain, a burly, thickset man with a neat brown beard streaked with silver and a pair of dark brown eyes which seemed to search one through and through, looked up from his writing as Michael entered the cabin and

Digitized by Google

stared at him frowningly for fully half a minute without speaking.

Michael, very nervous, shifted his feet uneasily. The silent scrutiny unnerved him.

"Humph!" grunted the skipper at last, looking Michael up and down without the trace of a smile, as he stood before him cap in hand. "You're the new sub-lieutenant? I dislike most sub-lieutenants. I find they have to be tamed."

Michael looked sheepish. For the life of him he could think of no suitable reply. Evidently this was what one of the watchkeepers had meant when he told Michael in a friendly way that the captain would probably "bite his head off" when he first saw him. And whatever happened he must not answer back. It was the skipper's way to terrorize a new-comer; but he meant nothing by it.

"I had to get rid of the last sub-lieutenant," Captain Sprott went on, glaring. "He was a most unsatisfactory young gentleman. You'll have to mind your P's and Q's while you're with me, young man—otherwise I'll get rid of you too!"

"I hope not, sir," said Michael anxiously.

"We shall see," the captain replied, wrinkling the corners of his eyes in the semblance of a smile. "Don't let me hear of you smoking in your cabin. Don't let me see you wearing flannel shirts in uniform like your predecessor. Ask the commander for my order book and read it carefully. Good mornin'!"

And the skipper, Michael soon discovered, though really one of the kindest-hearted men imaginable, had very decided ideas as to the method in which young officers should be brought up. A rigid disciplinarian and something of a martinet with a fiery and persuasive tongue, he possessed an eye like an eagle and a rooted aversion to untidiness or slackness, and did not hesitate to say so.

Always, when taking over a watch in harbour, Michael

Digitized by Google

walked round the ship and looked anxiously aloft and over the side to see that everything was as it should be. But almost as often, until he became aware of the captain's pet fads, he was sadly disabused by his commanding officer's stentorian bellow when he appeared for a morning stroll on the quarter-deck.

" Officer of the watch ! "

" Sir ? " said Michael, rushing aft with flying coat-tails and saluting.

" Where are your eyes, sir ? " the captain would demand, his beard bristling and pretending to be very angry indeed. " Damme, sir ! " he went on, pointing an accusing finger. " Rope-yarns on the deck ! Ladder falls not properly coiled down ! Berthing rails slack ! Irish pendants [1] hanging from the awning ridge-rope ! "

Michael, bowing to the inevitable, would express his sorrow, and the potentate, grunting and wearing his cap slightly askew, would stump heavily to the accommodation ladder platform to cast a searching eye aloft and outside the ship.

" Signal halliards hanging in festoons ! " he would point out, punctuating his remarks with jabs of his finger. " Boats' falls not properly hauled taut ! The boat-keeper in the cutter lolling like a tripper on a bank holiday picnic ! " pointing out a man in the stern-sheets of a boat lying at the boom who was leaning against the backboard in rather a free and easy attitude. " Starboard quarter-boom not square ! "

" I'm sorry, sir. I'll have it all seen to."

" I haven't half finished yet, Mister Eyes and No-Eyes ! " the captain retorted, beginning to enjoy himself.

The gangway stanchions and nameplate at the head of the ladder, shining and spotless to the ordinary eye, wanted cleaning. The side-boy was wearing his cap slightly crooked with the " SU " of " Sussex " not immediately over his nose, while his trousers were unspeakable. His bag must be mustered, and at once ! There were

[1] Irish pendants, i.e. stray ropes' ends.

Digitized by Google

some spots of fresh grey paint on the deck—send for the criminal who dared so to defile His Majesty's quarter-deck and make him clean up the gory mess! The carpenter, the old villain, had not yet repaired that broken grating which the captain had called attention to ten days ago! Send for the carpenter and have him eviscerated! And what the devil was the boatswain thinking of by leaving his tar buckets hanging up aloft like ornaments on a scarlet Christmas tree? Tarring down the after rigging? Of course they were—any fool could see that; but if the men had ceased work and gone to dinner their buckets should come down with them. Send for the boatswain! Never in all his born days had the captain suffered the misfortune of serving with watchkeepers so utterly unseeing. Never in all his life had he seen a ship in such a disgusting state of filth and disorder. The Service was going to the dogs, and when he had been a youngster things were vastly different. What the Hades they taught young officers in these days the Lord alone knew! Their ignorance was abysmal, their blindness pitiful!

It was not only Michael who was found fault with. It was every other watchkeeper and nearly every officer in turn, not even excluding the commander. Moreover, it was never the slightest use attempting to explain, for the captain would have none of it.

"I did not ask a question, sir!" he would roar. "I made a statement."

At the bottom of his heart, as already mentioned, Captain Sprott was one of the warmest-hearted men that Michael ever met. He barked a great deal when things went wrong, and barked very loudly, anathematizing everybody's eyes in turn, including his own. He made fiery speeches to the ship's company on the quarter-deck when he considered them slack at general drill and at coaling; and rapid coaling, above all things, was his chief hobby. The "Sussex" usually held the record for her squadron, and woe betide her if she didn't!

The captain's sudden explosions, though generally

Digitized by Google

deserved, were a little nerve-racking until one got used to them. But he meant nothing by them, and bore no ill-will, probably asking the subject of his wrath to lunch or dinner within an hour as if nothing unusual had happened. And there is no doubt that the tart reproof, though bitter enough at the time, did a power of good. It taught the officers to have a meticulous eye for cleanliness and small points of detail, no matter in what direction.

Once, steaming up the Thames estuary towards Sheerness, the captain waved an arm towards a small, brown-sailed boat with a trawl down.

" Hey, Mister Officer of the Watch ! " he demanded of Michael, " what's that boat catching ? "

" Fish, sir," said Michael promptly, taken unaware.

" Fish be blowed, sir ! " exclaimed his commanding officer. " They're catching shrimps. Can't you see 'em boilin' 'em in that gadget amidships with the chimney ? "

It was true—she was a shrimper, and the incident taught Michael to level his glass and to examine closely every vessel they approached at sea to forestall the captain's almost inevitable questions as to her probable route, ports of call, cargo, tonnage, speed, owners, and all the rest of it. It taught him a great deal that he had never known before, which was exactly what the skipper desired.

And in their hearts the officers and ship's company loved Captain Sprot. He was truly fierce and a real " taut hand " ; but so eminently just that people knew exactly where they stood. He was very human too, and when he left the " Sussex " for a new command the tears were almost in his eyes as he made a farewell speech to officers and men assembled on the quarter-deck.

" I'm not going to talk to you like a Dutch uncle to-day," he said. " I merely want to thank you for all you've done and the way you've worked. I've been proud of you, and I hope that with my successor the old ' Sussex ' will keep up her reputation of being the smartest

Digitized by Google

ship in the squadron. Good-bye, and the best of luck to you all."

When he finally departed in the stern-sheets of a twelve-oared cutter with the commander steering on the dickey and the oars manned by officers, the ship's company, of their own accord, lined the side and clambered aloft to cheer and to wave their caps. It showed, more than anything else, what they thought of him.

For the first month or so after Michael joined, the ship remained at Devonport and in Plymouth Sound, and then, after a brief stay at Gibraltar, proceeded to Ajaccio, in Corsica, where she joined the rest of her squadron. Then Gibraltar again, followed by a visit to Portland. At the end of July and the beginning of August came the usual manœuvres in the English Channel between the Red and Blue Fleets, a total of twenty-three battleships and twenty cruisers of the combined Home and Channel Fleets and Cruiser Squadron, together with certain vessels specially commissioned for the occasion from the reserve. Wireless was still more or less in its infancy and of comparatively short range, and it was during these manœuvres that ships formed a chain three miles apart to pass messages by masthead semaphore from Portland to Torbay, and from Guernsey to Portland. Within a year or two the heavy masthead semaphores were to become obsolete.

It was at the end of May that Michael had a letter from Uncle Pooley telling him that they had heard by telegram that Diana, who was just about to come home, was seriously ill with scarlet fever in Italy and that Aunt Margaret had gone out to be with her.

Michael and Diana had corresponded regularly once a month, bulky letters written day by day and full of what they had seen and done. But they were also love-letters written from the very bottom of their warm young hearts, and came as some sort of consolation for not being able to see each other.

" In less than three weeks I shall be home again," she

Digitized by Google

had written in the last budget he had received. "Oh, my dear, you don't know how I am yearning to see you again, and I am going to see you, whatever Aunt M. may say or do."

And now his dearly beloved, the person he adored more than anyone else in the world, was seriously ill. It would have been bad enough if she had been ill at home; but to think of her suffering among comparative strangers in a beastly foreign country and attended by some wretch of a foreign doctor was almost more than he could bear. People sometimes died of scarlet fever, and supposing Diana died! The very thought of it flung him into the depths of despair and misery. If he had possessed the necessary money and could have obtained leave he would have gone post-haste to Florence. He would not have been allowed to see her, of course; but it would have been some consolation to think that he was somewhere near at hand.

As it was, he was forced to content himself by telegraphing to Uncle Pooley imploring him to wire the bulletins when they came. Meanwhile mingled anxiety and impatience gnawed at his soul, and it was not until eight days later, by which time he had worked himself into a state of abject depression, that there came a welcome telegram from his uncle: "Diana progressing very well all anxiety over don't worry."

It was a Saturday morning when he received that joyful message, and the same afternoon the ship put to sea. And after dinner that evening in the wardroom, when, after the health of His Majesty, they drank the usual toast on Saturday night at sea of "Sweethearts and Wives," Michael sipped his glass of port with thankfulness surging at his heart.

Diana was better! Diana was better! He could have shouted aloud for the sheer joy of it.

Recovered but still rather weak, she came home again in the middle of July; but it was not until October, when Michael went on a fortnight's leave, that he saw her again.

Digitized by Google

Early in September, in which month Michael was twenty-one and received a fitted suit-case from Aunt Margaret and Uncle Pooley, a useful cheque from his father, and a pair of silver-backed hairbrushes from Diana, the " Sussex," with the other ships of her squadron, and a number of transports carrying soldiers, took part in the combined manœuvres at Clacton-on-Sea, where a number of troops, representing an army corps, with all their guns, horses, and impedimenta, were landed on the open beach in active service conditions. It was the first time anything of the sort had been done for many years, and the navy was called upon to provide the necessary beach parties, to erect and maintain temporary piers, to tow horse-boats ashore laden with guns, wagons, horses, and stores, and all the available ships' and transports' boats filled with armed men.

As it was something quite out of the usual run of their business the seamen enjoyed it hugely, living a piratical life ashore in tents and bathing machines, working day and night in building their piers, dragging laden horse-boats ashore, and stealing surreptitious rides and persuading recalcitrant mules to step ashore by methods which horrified the soldiers, and endeavouring to get their comrades in arms dryshod to the land by way of the rickety plank piers, floated by means of boats and empty barrels, and swaying perilously in the lop and sagging in the fierce tideway off the shore.

Whether or not the soldiers enjoyed it was quite another matter, for the second day of the disembarkation it rained heavily and the wind and sea got up. The temporary piers constantly broke away from their moorings, to be cast piecemeal on the beach, and few of the troops, laden with their packs, rifles, and ammunition, and numbers of them seasick after a dismal passage ashore, got to dry land without wading up to their waists in water. Moreover, several of the unwieldy horse-boats drifted ashore in the night and failed to survive the strain, which was little to be wondered at as some of them

Digitized by Google

had been built nearly thirty years before at the time of some long-forgotten war-scare.

At the end of September came a fortnight's visit to Rothesay. It was the first time the navy had visited the place for many years, and officers and men were entertained and their ships thrown open to visitors. It certainly was rather trying when seven or eight large excursion steamers came alongside in rapid succession to disgorge a multitude of both sexes and many children hailing principally from Glasgow.

The sacred quarter-deck became a hideous shambles of paper bags, the grisly remains of food, cigarette ends, and the unmistakable signs of wholesale expectoration. Crowds even invaded the mess-decks, pulled aside the curtains of officers' cabins as the occupants were dressing to go ashore, while the wardroom skylight was lined with a row of inquisitive heads eyeing the officers as they sat at their " seven bell tea " and making loud and ribald remarks as to their personal appearance as though they were wild beasts in a menagerie. Not even certain small compartments on the upper-deck bearing the mystic legends " Vacant " and " Engaged " on the revolving tell-tales on their doors were safe from prying eyes.

It was all very fit and proper that the taxpaying public should see something of the navy they paid for ; but to officers and men whose privacy was ruthlessly invaded by a swarming multitude the experience was anything but pleasant. Those who could went ashore to escape the invasion. Those who could not stayed on board and made the best of a bad job. Michael, having been told off to conduct one party round the ship, was presented at the conclusion of the tour with a double handful of moist, warm coppers collected by an officious gentleman with a hat. Another man, slightly the worse for drink, pressed upon him a small, flat flask three parts full of raw whisky, and, on its being politely but firmly refused, drank the contents himself at a gulp and attempted to sing " Rule Britannia " in the broadest and most incoherent Scots.

Digitized by Google

They were nothing if not grateful—bless their simple hearts! But how glad one was when the last of them departed.

Michael Bray — *Chapter XXXI*

MICHAEL was on leave at Marlings for ten days in October; but things were a little difficult and the atmosphere rather strained. Tony Masters, who was staying in the house for a fortnight's shooting, was the real fly in the ointment, and although Michael was not prevented from seeing as much of Diana as he liked, they both realized that their aunt's eagle and not very sympathetic eye was always upon them.

It was obvious that Aunt Margaret was doing her utmost to forward Tony's suit with Diana. For ever she tried to pair them off—out shooting, for the Sunday walk to church, even at meals. For ever, when she found Michael alone, she cast veiled hints into Michael's unwilling ears as to Tony's desirability as a husband—Tony's money and position, the baronetcy and property to which he would succeed on the death of his father, his prowess at games, his good looks.

It was exasperating to Michael to see his rival encouraged to dance attendance upon his beloved Diana. He could not help admitting that Tony was a good-hearted sort of fellow in his own peculiar way; but could not abide his conceit, and the way he looked down upon him—Michael—with amused tolerance as a species of glorified schoolboy.

Michael did not possess a pair of hammerless ejectors by Boss and could not afford to tip keepers with golden sovereigns. His wardrobe was not extensive and his clothes did not come from Savile Row. Tony, always immaculately turned out, seemed to own so many suits that he never wore the same day garments twice during

Digitized by Google

the week. Michael's country clothes, on the other hand, consisted of an unspeakable old shooting coat and knickerbockers, with a pair of grey flannel trousers, very baggy at the knees, by way of an occasional change. He had left his trouser-press in the ship, and his evening and Sunday nether garments were creased by being placed beneath his mattress while he slept. Tony possessed a valet and flourished a gold cigarette case engraved with his initials and filled with Egyptian cigarettes at eighteen shillings the hundred. He wore pearl studs, diamond cuff-links, and possessed a motor, something of an expensive novelty at that time.

Tony's money indeed, and general air of opulence, stunk in Michael's nostrils. He was too exquisite altogether, too tidy, too careful about his colour schemes and the harmonious blending of his suits and ties and socks and handkerchiefs, too pernickety about his sleek, carefully oiled head with its every hair in place. Moreover, there was also that beastly eyeglass, which Michael longed to grind to powder beneath his heel.

Pampered and brought up in the atmosphere of luxury, Tony Masters was a colourless sort of person, very unlike other men of his age that Michael had met in the navy. He had no opinions worthy of the name, no ideas beyond his own comfort and amusements. He really knew nothing of the world or anything that really mattered, and irritated Michael beyond words with his colossal ignorance of the navy and of what it was really for. Moreover, he talked with a drawl and was supercilious and affected in his manner, affectations which life at a public school and the 'Varsity, followed by service during the South African war, had not seemed to eradicate. Above all things, Michael abhorred being condescended to and addressed as " young man." Rather vindictively he would cheerfully have given half a month's pay to have seen the impeccable Tony roughing it on the bridge of a destroyer in a gale of wind, or subjected to the indignities of one of those after-dinner rags in the " Boreas's "

Digitized by Google

gunroom when people's clothes were sometimes torn off their backs and they were left partially naked but wholly unashamed with little more on than a tattered shirt.

" I can't think what you see in him," Michael once said to his aunt when, pruning ramblers in the garden, she had spent some time extolling Tony's virtues.

" My dear boy," she replied, " Tony is extremely good-looking and very well off."

Michael laughed rather rudely.

" I don't see how that makes him a good chap," he objected. " He's fearfully pleased with himself; and what's he done ? "

" He's a very good shot, Michael, and hunts and plays polo and cricket and golf very well, and all that sort of thing," said Aunt Margaret, rather nettled.

" That's merely because he's rolling in money, or his father is," Michael snorted. " He's never had to earn his own living, and has got nothing better to do than dawdle round playing games."

" You don't understand," she explained. " Some day Tony will be a landed proprietor."

Michael hooted with amusement.

" Well, if he's a fair sample of a landed proprietor thank the Lord I shall never be one ! " he retorted with fervour.

Aunt Margaret bridled.

" That's an extremely rude remark to make about one of my guests," she exclaimed. " I am surprised at you, Michael—indeed I am."

" I'm sorry, Aunt M.," he apologized, patting her on the arm. " I didn't mean to offend you. What I really wanted to know was what he'd done and what sort of use in the world a chap like Tony really is."

" He has his business in the city," she told him, still far from pleased. " And he hopes to stand for Parliament some day."

" But I don't think much of that. His business can't

Digitized by Google

be very serious, and anyone can stand for Parliament if they've got money and influence."

"And look how well he did in South Africa, Michael? He was A.D.C. to ——"

"But I fought in China when I was under seventeen and am not for ever gassing about it!" Michael interrupted, tired of having Tony's valour as an amateur soldier dinned into his ears. "After all, I expect we had a darned sight fruitier time in China than Tony ever dreamt of; but I don't go chawing my fat [1] about it."

"I can't understand your naval expressions and see no use in discussing the matter," said his aunt with acerbity, pulling on her gardening gloves and picking up her basket preparatory to moving off. "I like Tony and evidently you do not. We are both entitled to our opinions."

"Yes," her nephew agreed, "I suppose we are. I'm sorry if I was a bit rude, Aunt M.," he went on to apologize. "I didn't mean to offend you—really I didn't."

"Oh, that's all right," she smiled back at him. "I can quite understand your disliking Tony. You think that perhaps Diana will—er—change her mind."

"I'm jolly certain she won't," said Michael. "I'll have a small bet on it if you like."

"Perhaps she won't," his aunt replied, carefully snipping off a dead shoot. "Don't think I'm trying to put obstacles in your way, my dear boy," she went on in a kinder tone. "I am very fond of you, and I realize that you and Diana are very fond of each other. But I am naturally anxious to see her comfortably settled, and from some points of view I should not be sorry if she fell in love with Tony. But I shouldn't dream of trying to coerce her," she added hastily, noticing the look of horror on Michael's face as he opened his mouth to protest. "Oh, dear me, no! But if they did take a fancy to each other they could be married almost at once."

Michael writhed inwardly. "She won't fall in love with him!" he said stoutly, shaking his head with

[1] "Chawing my fat," i.e. talking loudly.

Digitized by Google

vehemence. "We've talked it all over, heaps and heaps of times. I've even volunteered to steer clear of her, but she wouldn't have it. Of course we can't help thinking how jolly nice it would be if we could be properly engaged and all that," he continued. "But, since you insist upon it, we're quite prepared to wait till I'm twenty-five until we get married. Diana won't change her mind, I'll bet you, and I know jolly well I shan't."

"Four years is a long time to wait," his aunt returned. "Diana is very attractive, and you cannot expect her not to have admirers. And you too, Mike—if you went abroad and didn't see Diana for a long time, say two or three years, it is just possible you might forget her a little and find some nice girl with lots of money you rather took a fancy to and wanted to marry."

"Oh, curse the beastly money!" He sniffed. "We don't care about that, so long as we've got enough to struggle along on. Anyhow," he added, "there's not much chance of our changing our minds."

"We shall see," said Aunt Margaret enigmatically, renewing her onslaught upon the roses. "People sometimes do when they get a little older."

Michael felt vaguely annoyed. What right had other people to dictate to Diana and himself, to cast doubts upon their loyalty to each other?

From the way in which Aunt Margaret had at first seemed to relent, but had now adopted an attitude almost of passive resistance, it was palpable that, whatever her own ideas on the matter might be, she had been asked by Michael's father to do everything in her power to discourage any sort of a binding agreement between his son and Diana.

And it was in no very happy frame of mind that Michael went again to Marlings for his fortnight's leave at Christmas. True, Tony Masters was no longer there, and both Aunt Margaret and Uncle Pooley were glad to see him—Uncle Pooley especially. But the big house was full of relations and young cousins, and Diana and

Digitized by Google

Michael, without the recognized status of a properly engaged couple, had little opportunity of seeing much of each other alone. Moreover, her father's death and her own illness had left their marks upon her, while the worry of her aunt's unconciliatory attitude seemed to be getting more and more upon her nerves. She had become thinner and had lost something of her freshness and energy. Dark rings appeared under her eyes, she complained of bad nights, and was certainly subject to occasional bouts of moodiness and depression utterly foreign to her character. She seemed embittered and listless, and to have lost interest in everyday things, and was no longer the happy, high-spirited girl of sixteen months before who had welcomed Michael home. It grieved him to see the change in her.

"I'm so tired of being here," she confessed to him during one of their walks together through the bleak December woods, the only place they could open their hearts to each other without risk of interruption. "So very tired."

"How d'you mean, old girl?"

"Oh, I don't know," she answered wearily. "It's all so difficult to explain. Aunt M.'s very kind; but somehow I'm sick of loafing about doing nothing. It's all so purposeless, and the people one meets here seem to think of nothing but how to amuse themselves. Oh, if only I'd been brought up to do something! Aunt M., too——"

Michael looked at her.

"D'you mean she's still trying to make you marry Tony Masters?" he asked sharply. "She told me she'd never try to persuade you against your will."

"She doesn't," the girl answered unhappily. "It's not so much what she says as the way she goes on. I know she thinks I'm making a blithering fool of myself for not wanting to marry him," she added bitterly. "She thinks I'm ungrateful and beastly for not jumping at the chance of making what she considers a splendid match. Ugh!"

Digitized by Google

Michael growled something fierce and unintelligible beneath his breath and slashed viciously at a bush with his walking-stick.

"Oh, Mike, dear!" she went on, her voice trembling, "I couldn't ever marry Tony. He's so sort of—well—he thinks he's so irresistible, and imagines he's only got to be pleasant to girls to have them all wanting to marry him. He's so cynical, too, and looks upon girls like horses or dogs, as if they could be bought and petted or bullied, and he's boasted to me about some of his love-affairs. I feel in my bones he's not—he's not——" she hesitated, searching for a suitable word.

"He's not what?" Michael demanded.

"Well—clean," she explained, reddening a little and looking away from him. "Yes, it's that that I really hate about him."

"Do you mean he isn't straight?"

Diana nodded.

"Yes," she answered. "He sometimes says such beastly things about women—horrid things—and I know he's very friendly with that Mrs. Lunn."

"And who's Mrs. Lunn?"

"Oh, you know. She's the woman who was divorced last year. She used to live near here, and Aunt M. knew her quite well."

"That woman?" Michael exclaimed in disgust, remembering a very sordid affair which, as something of a *cause célèbre*, had occupied columns in some of the newspapers and had been talked about in hushed whispers all over the countryside. "Do you mean he was friendly with her before or after the divorce?"

"Before—and after," Diana told him.

"But how on earth do you know, old lady?"

"Kitty told me."

"How does she know?"

"She's seen them at Ranelagh and dining together in London, and once or twice at the theatre, quite lately too.

Digitized by Google

And Reggie told her that Tony was a regular rotter with women, though she wouldn't go into details."

Michael snorted with anger.

"This absolutely puts the lid on it!" he exclaimed. "Does Aunt M. know?"

"I don't think she can," Diana replied. "Kitty merely told me because she thought I ought to know. She made me promise I wouldn't tell a single soul. I've told you," she added tenderly. "But you're different, Mike, dear."

Michael ground his teeth.

"The swine!" he exclaimed. "Blow it all, Diana! I'll tell Aunt M., and then she'll never let him come near you again."

"No, no!" she cried anxiously. "You can't do that, Mike! It's just possible there's nothing in it."

"I'll bet you there is," he growled.

"It doesn't matter," Diana persisted. "You must promise me you won't say a word. Promise, Mike! Promise!"

"I've never liked the brute, and now I hate him!" Michael retorted. "Why shouldn't I tell Aunt M.? You know how strait-laced she is, and if Kitty's certain——"

"No, no, you mustn't!" she begged, putting her hand on his arm. "Swear to me on your solemn word of honour you won't say a word."

Michael thought for a moment.

"Very well," he said grudgingly. "If you want me to keep it quiet I will. But it's beastly for you, and makes things pretty rotten for me to know he's keen on you and that Aunt M. sort of encourages him to come buzzing round you with his beastly attentions. It makes me squirm to think of it!"

"He can buzz till he's blue in the face," Diana answered, with a wan little smile. "It doesn't make the slightest difference to my feelings, though I must say it's dreadfully wearing at times. Oh, Mike, darling!" she

Digitized by Google

added with sudden fervour, halting on the slushy, leaf-strewn path beside a great oak and looking him full in the eyes, " swear to heaven you'll go on loving me for ever and ever! You're all I've got. Nothing else matters—nothing, nothing! " Her eyes were wet.

" Dear old girl! " he said awkwardly, taking her in his arms and straining her to him to kiss her eyes and lips, " don't you know I want you more than anything else in the world? "

" Darling person! " she whispered happily, " that's all that really matters. Everything else can go to blazes, and I don't care a—damn! I love having your arms round me. I feel so—so safe with you."

Michael Bray *Chapter XXXII*

On the last day of the year 1904 Michael, having obtained the necessary certificate from Captain Sprott to say that he was fully competent to take charge of a watch at sea, was promoted to lieutenant and reappointed to the " Sussex." His age was twenty-one and three months, and it was a proud and eventful day when he blossomed out into all the glory of his second stripe and wrote to his outfitters ordering his first pair of " lightning conductors "—or gold-laced trousers worn in full, ball, or mess dress—which did not form part of a sub-lieutenant's uniform. It was a blessed relief to think that his pay was now doubled to ten shillings a day, that his gunroom days were over for ever, that he had succeeded in climbing to the fourth rung of the difficult promotion ladder without slipping, and that, from now on, he was no longer a mere sub, a sort of glorified midshipman, but a trusted lieutenant in His Majesty's Fleet.

Life for the rest of the year, until the " Sussex " paid off in October, was sufficiently strenuous to be interesting. The ship, with the rest of her squadron, affiliated by this

Digitized by Google

time to the Channel Fleet, visited Portland, Rothesay, Loch Broom, certain anchorages in the island of Skye, Invergordon, the Firth of Forth, Berehaven, and Portsmouth. It was the first time British squadrons had cruised in the North Sea for many a long year, and whilst in the Firth of Forth the ships were again inundated with visitors.

Battle practice had been instituted at ranges of five to six thousand yards, together with an improvised system of fire control, and many hours were spent at sea in aiming rifle practice or in day and night firings with the six-inch and three-pounder guns. The gunnery, though not good according to modern standards, was certainly improving.

Michael's diary at this period was full of days spent exercising at sea and coaling in harbour, though he certainly found frequent opportunities of stretching his legs ashore and managed thoroughly to enjoy himself. His golf, like the gunnery, was getting better.

In July, after short naval manœuvres, the "Sussex" spent a fortnight at an anchorage, to the northward of Dublin, practising embarking and disembarking soldiers, horses, guns, and wagons from a transport for the benefit of cavalry and infantry from the Curragh. It was hard work, for the naval beach party, living ashore in tents, worked from dawn till eve, and were generally up to their waists in water. But the weather was perfect and deliciously warm and the picnic life in any old clothes was a welcome change very much to the liking of officers and men. Moreover, it was one of those rare occasions when army and navy worked together in peace and were afforded a chance of knowing each other and of learning something of each other's methods.

Michael, in common with a good many young naval officers, was rather inclined to be shy of military officers. He imagined them as stand-offish and rather full of their own importance, and that, with expensive tastes and plenty of private means to gratify them, they rather looked down upon their naval brethren as poor and

Digitized by Google

somewhat addicted to the bottle. It was true that few naval officers had much beyond their scanty pay, though from what Michael had seen of the Service there was certainly no more drinking than in any other walk of life; probably a good deal less. There were, of course, the black sheep; but they existed in every fold.

And he soon modified his opinion as to the character of the army officer. Those he met and worked with, from the generals themselves down to the most junior subalterns, were the keenest, cheeriest, most charming people imaginable, and very human. There were no fancy frills about them either, and it was a cheering sight to see an ordinarily immaculate cavalry captain, very sketchily clad in a tunic and bathing drawers, working up to his waist in water in assisting to disembark his beloved horses from a horse-boat. In the relations between the military officers, too, except on actual duty, there was a free and easy camaraderie with little of the "No, sir," and "Yes, sir," which obtained in the navy. It was usually "No, Major," or "Yes, Colonel," and Michael vaguely wondered what would happen if he borrowed a leaf from their book and, on meeting Captain Sprott for the first time in the day, genially said, "Good morning, Captain!" The old boy—he was not really old at all, in spite of his beard—would probably have fallen off his perch in astonishment and have given him an unhappy five minutes with that caustic tongue of his, if not have ordered him to his cabin under arrest.

The navy certainly found the army excellent and most easy to get on with, and it is to be hoped that the army did the same. Certainly, from the way they borrowed each other's expressions, shared each other's food, dined in each other's messes, and worked alongside each other, one might have imagined them to be blood brothers brought up in the same traditions and ideas. The sailor, perhaps, found his responsibility a little younger than his opposite number in the army; but otherwise they were not dissimilar.

Digitized by Google

The seamen, too, soon ceased to regard soldiers as a race apart, strange, automaton-like creatures, wonderful at drill and unduly meticulous about their pipeclayed belts and polished buttons, whom they opprobriously nicknamed " grabbies " or " leather-necks."

The soldiers, also, no longer looked upon bluejackets as peculiar, web-footed denizens of an uncomfortably heaving element and full of strange expressions interlarded with lurid oaths. True, their language was a little difficult to understand at times, for they talked about " starboard " and " port " in referring to a horse instead of " off " and " near," and had nicknames for everything and everybody under the sun. However, after a little practice, it was soon possible to grasp what they meant.

Apart from little things like these the members of one Service found the men of the other remarkably like themselves, so much so that they soon came to the point of swopping tobacco and cigarettes and exchanging caps as a sign of eternal amity and goodwill. Moreover, they seemed to delight in learning each other's work, for while the troops disported themselves in boats, pulled on ropes, knotted and spliced, and used the most nautical language, the seamen revelled in riding barebacked horses, in swimming them across creeks while hanging on behind and steering them by their tails, and cracking whips on the box-seats of general service wagons careering at full tilt along the sandy beach.

The rank and file on both sides had one thing very much in common: they both had a profound liking for beer, and whereas there were no wet canteens on board His Majesty's ships, the soldiers, lucky people, had theirs always with them, even under canvas.

There was an impromptu regatta and sports, with pulling races in boats for the troops, bareback races for the seamen, and greasy poles, tugs-of-war, three-legged races, horse-swimming races, and wrestling on horseback for every one. On the last day of all came a farewell dinner on board the ship, when the general and many

Digitized by Google

military officers dined in the wardroom, or rather on the half-deck outside, as there was insufficient seating accommodation in the mess itself.

The captain made a neat and complimentary little speech full of regret at having to leave, and was cheered to the echo. The general, a tall, thin man who had distinguished himself as a cavalry leader in South Africa, replied at some length, and it did the naval portion of his audience good to hear him.

He said a good deal which was all very much to the point, and finally sat down in a roar of enthusiastic cheering after having made the best extemporary speech to which Michael had ever listened. What a splendid idea it would be if there were more chances of the army and navy working together in preparation for the real thing. What a fine lot of fellows the officers and men of the army were when once one got to know and to understand them. Never again would Michael regard them as gilded popinjays.

In August the " Sussex " was one of the fleet of eleven battleships, nine cruisers, and twenty-four destroyers detailed to welcome the French squadron off Cowes for the further ratification of the *Entente Cordiale.* It was a wonderful spectacle when, on a perfect summer day, the ships of the visiting squadron arrived with the booming of guns and steamed to their anchorage through the lines of British vessels dressed overall with fluttering bunting, their ships' companies " manning ship " and cheering, and the bands blaring " God Save the King " and the soul-stirring " Marseillaise." It was a day of ceremonial, with officers in full dress and the men in their " number ones " and straw hats, for a salute was fired by the assembled fleet and the ships were manned as His Majesty, King Edward VII, left the " Victoria and Albert " to call on the French admiral in the " Masséna," and again when he returned. And throughout the afternoon bands were playing, guards were parading, bugles were screeching, and guns were booming as the flag officers passed to

Digitized by Google

and fro in their barges paying and returning their official calls. After dark, when the French admiral and captains were dining with the King, the entire fleet was illuminated. Then fireworks, with set pieces of the King and Queen and President Loubet displayed between the masts of the battleships, mottoes outlined in fire, and bouquets of rockets fired hundreds at a time until the heavens blazed and the Solent was carpeted with rocket-sticks.

The next day the fleets were again dressed with flags and the " Sussex " and other ships were full of visitors. Diana, Aunt Margaret, Uncle Pooley, and Kitty and her fiancé came on board as Michael's guests for lunch and tea and dinner, to go round the fleet in a steamboat, and to see the illuminations after dark. It was a joyful day so far as Michael was concerned, for in the afternoon, having palmed Aunt Margaret off on the chaplain, who had no guests of his own, and leaving Kitty and her young man to their own devices and Uncle Pooley on deck with a comfortable chair, a long cigar, and a telescope to watch the yacht races, he was able to disappear into his cabin with Diana for fully half an hour and then to conduct her for a lengthy tour through the bowels of the ship.

The assembled fleet was reviewed by King Edward in the Royal yacht. There were garden parties and entertainments for officers and men, and, on August 10th, by which time the French ships had gone into Portsmouth Harbour and the British vessels had moved to Spithead, there came the Lord Mayor of London's banquet at the Guildhall, to which about one hundred and fifty French and British officers were invited, Michael among them.

It was a function he never forgot. Leaving Portsmouth in state in decorated Pullman carriages at ten o'clock in the morning they were regaled with champagne and cakes and ices and sandwiches and cigars on the way up. Arriving at Victoria at noon they took their places in forty carriages, two French and two British officers in each, and, forming a procession, with the senior officers in front, drove past Buckingham Palace and through Pall

Digitized by Google

Mall and the Strand on their way to the Guildhall. Everywhere the streets and houses were decorated and the pavements were lined with dense throngs of people fluttering handkerchiefs and waving the tricolour of France while they cheered and shouted "Vive la France!" —"Vive l'Entente Cordiale!"

The bearded French officer sitting opposite Michael was visibly overcome at the reception, and with tears of emotion in his eyes sat bowing to right and to left like an automaton with his hand at his cocked hat with its little rosette of red, white, and blue. Michael, who found he had forgotten a good deal of his French, had been pointing out the sights as they drove along; but purposely said nothing when they came to Trafalgar Square. His French *via-à-vis*, however, recognized the Nelson Monument, for on passing it he turned towards it with a bow and saluted with a grace worthy of his country.

"A hundred years ago your great Nelson was our brave enemy," he explained in French. "To-day England France are united. Vive l'Entente Cordiale! Vive l'Angleterre et la marine Anglaise!"

"Vive la belle France!" said Michael rather awkwardly, gripping the white-gloved hand held out towards him. He was unused to displaying his feelings in public.

Arriving at the Guildhall they were introduced one by one to the Lord Mayor and aldermen in a crush of people, in which epaulettes were whipped off people's shoulders and swords got horribly in the way. Then *déjeuner*, the most gargantuan meal Michael had ever partaken of, with its turtle soup, salmon, fillets of sole, lobster salad, quails in aspic, lamb cutlets, baron of beef carved by a man in white cap and apron on a sort of pulpit, roast chicken, lamb and other items too numerous to mention. There were four different brands of champagne, forty and four other kinds of drinks; but Michael, who really ought to have known better, horrified his wine waiter by asking for ginger ale.

"I'm sorry, sir," the man replied crushingly. "We

Digitized by Google

haven't got none of that 'ere. Our gentlemen usually 'as champagne."

So champagne it had to be, though Michael, who was not really fond of it, had already had as much as he wanted on the way up in the train. It was a hot day and he was genuinely thirsty.

The meal over, there were the usual toasts and speeches, and soon after three o'clock, when the French officers had gone to a reception at their Embassy, the British contingent drove to one of the large hotels in Northumberland Avenue, where there was more food and more to drink. Then the drive back to Victoria to catch the special train at five-fifteen. More to eat and drink on the way to Portsmouth if one wanted it, and Michael finally arrived back on board his ship at eight o'clock.

It had been a wonderful experience, particularly that drive through the streets and those crowds of cheering people. Michael had always thought the British rather phlegmatic and unemotional, but they had certainly let themselves go on this occasion. Their welcome had been deafening, whole-hearted, and spontaneous.

Yes; the *Entente Cordiale* was an excellent thing. In the summer of 1898 Great Britain and France had been rather at loggerheads over the Fashoda business and were ready to fly at each other's throats. Now, six short years later, they were falling on each other's necks and vowing eternal friendship. And France, Michael knew, was still smarting under the indignity of her defeat by Germany in '70 and '71 and the loss of Alsace and Lorraine. What did this *Entente Cordiale* portend? he wondered.

But he was glad that so far as he was concerned Lord Mayors' banquets were likely to be few and far between. He was utterly sick of the sight of anything to eat.

After the departure of the French Fleet the "Sussex" and another cruiser escorted King Edward in the "Victoria and Albert" to Flushing on his way to Marien-

Digitized by Google

bad, a service for which the captains of both the escorting cruisers were summoned on board the Royal yacht on arrival and invested with the M.V.O.

Joining up with the remainder of the Channel Fleet the ship then visited Ijmuiden, in Holland, whence Michael spent a day in Amsterdam. The next port of call was Graa Deep, the roadstead for the Danish port of Esbjerg, where the fleet was anchored five miles from the shore and nine miles from the town itself. One hundred officers were entertained at a banquet and dance given by the Danish authorities at the seaside resort of Nordby, in Fano Island, a festive affair which Michael attended and much enjoyed. The Danish girls were certainly extremely pretty and were excellent dancers, though his modesty was a little shocked at discovering that none of his partners wore corsets!

The weather throughout this short cruise was very bad indeed. Even at anchor things were uncomfortable, and boatwork wet and dangerous; but on the way back to Portland for gunnery practices in the teeth of a south-westerly gale the "Sussex" rolled very heavily indeed, and took in green seas over the forecastle and upper deck. Never had Michael realized that a comparatively big ship could be so lively. She was every bit as bad as a destroyer.

There followed another short visit to the west coast of Scotland, and, after carrying out her battle practice at Portland, the "Sussex" proceeded to Devonport, where she paid off at the end of October.

So far as Michael was concerned it had been an eventful commission. He had become a lieutenant and had attained to full manhood, and in the six years that had elapsed since he had joined the "Hamilcar" as a naval cadet the navy seemed to have changed beyond recognition.

On leaving the ship he went automatically on half pay to await another appointment. It was lucky he could go to Marlings, for he was left kicking his heels for two

Digitized by Google

months on the princely sum of four shillings per diem, less than half the ten shillings a day which was then the normal pay of a lieutenant.

Michael Bray — *Chapter XXXIII*

It was not until a month later—by which time, studying the "Navy List" almost daily, Michael had buoyed himself up with the belief that his request for appointment to a Home Fleet battleship or cruiser would be granted—that the long-expected official envelope with the blue Admiralty stamp in the corner appeared on the hall table at Marlings. It arrived by the midday post on a bleak morning in mid-December with a high wind and the rain coming down in torrents, and tearing open the envelope Michael hastily scanned the document inside.

His heart nearly stopped. He felt physically sick. He was appointed to the "Norfolk," a sister ship to the "Sussex," due to commission at Chatham early in January. With the usual irony of fate they were sending him again to China!

He felt a sudden hatred for the Service which ordered him so many thousands of miles away when he particularly wished to remain at home. China was undoubtedly a good station. Of course Michael had been promised nothing; but there must be dozens of lieutenants who would welcome the chance of going abroad, so why should he be pitched upon for exile to the ends of the earth when he particularly wanted to remain at home? What difference could it possibly make to the Admiralty?

But junior lieutenants, after all, were mere nobodies. There were hundreds of them in the Service. A few of the luckier ones were related to or knew senior officers, and, through them, brought influence to bear and so managed to get what appointments they wanted; but the greater number, of whom Michael was one, must go

Digitized by Google

where they were sent without protest. Junior officers could not pick and choose, and if once an appointment were refused, it meant a black mark against one's name in the Admiralty records, followed by eternal unpopularity and the practical ruin of one's career.

And now it was China, which meant two whole years away from Diana. He felt numb with the shock and disappointment of it. Two whole years abroad was an eternity to anyone who loved a girl as he did.

Constant dripping can wear away the hardest stone; and with him abroad in the uttermost parts of the earth he had a foreboding that Diana might succumb to Aunt Margaret's persuasion and marry someone else before he returned. Not that he doubted Diana. On the contrary, he knew she loved him with all her heart and soul; but two years—two whole years—anything might happen. He could never feel really safe and happy about it.

Uncle Pooley, Michael knew, was his friend and ally, and was only too anxious that he and his cousin should marry and be happy ever afterwards. But the dear old man was as clay in the potter's hands when it came to having his way with Aunt M. Hating rows he acquiesced in everything she set her mind to for the sake of peace and quietness, and Aunt Margaret was so determined and persistent that in time she might overcome Diana's resistance and cajole her into marrying some young man whom Michael would hate for ever afterwards. It was some little consolation to think that by this time Tony Masters was definitely out of the running. He was no longer asked to the house and Aunt Margaret seldom mentioned him, from which it seemed as if she must have heard something which had put him in her bad books, as indeed she had. But there were other young men whom she did not regard with disapproval—plenty of them.

If only Diana and himself could be properly engaged he would feel perfectly happy. Michael was over twenty-two and his cousin a few months younger. Surely they were of an age to know their own minds?

Digitized by Google

But when, before telling the unwelcome news to Diana, Michael sought out Aunt Margaret in her sitting-room and laid the case before her she was, though pleasant and sympathetic enough, as adamant as ever. She had made up her mind, and no argument that Michael could think of would induce her to change it. And Aunt Margaret held the whip hand.

"I'm sorry you are going abroad, Michael, dear," she told him. "We shall miss you."

"And you can bet I'm jolly sorry to be going," he said with a wry face. "I hate it."

"But, don't you see, dear boy, what an excellent thing it is for you both?" she asked, beaming at him through the spectacles which she always used for writing and needlework.

"Excellent?" Michael sniffed. "I call it rotten!"

"What I mean, Michael, is that it will give Diana and yourself a chance of testing each other," she pointed out. "Two years may seem a very long time, I know; but if you are really and truly fond of each other it will soon pass. You are both very young."

"But we know we're fond of each other!" he exclaimed.

"You mean you think you are," his aunt answered. "You may be making a great mistake, which afterwards, if you had your own way, you might regret bitterly."

Michael snorted with impatience. "I don't see why," he persisted. "We're——"

She silenced him with a wave of her hand. "Your father does not wish you to be engaged at present," she went on with a touch of asperity. "Neither do I. Your uncle and myself are Diana's guardians, remember, so you must fall in with our wishes. After all, dear boy, while your father is in India this is your home. We have always been glad to have you here, and it is a little ungrateful of you not to—well, not to do as we ask. You are terribly obstinate, Michael," she added with a sigh. "You are singularly like your father in that respect."

Digitized by Google

"I know you've been jolly good to me," said Michael, feeling rather a beast. "I'm not ungrateful—really I'm not. I am so fond of Diana, though. But—well, I see it's no use arguing about it."

"I agree with you, Michael, it isn't," said his aunt. "It only makes things very uncomfortable and unpleasant for all of us."

"But it makes things pretty putrid for Diana and myself," he put in. "She feels it as much as I do; you've only got to look at her. We can't help being fond of each other. Hang it all!"

"I know, Michael—I know all that perfectly well."

"Supposing I send a cable out to father explaining things?" he suggested, suddenly smitten by the notion. "I might even write him a letter, and perhaps he'd agree to our being decently engaged. He seemed to be coming round a bit the last time he wrote to me."

"There is not the least chance of his hearing of it," said Aunt Margaret very firmly. "Even if he agreed I am afraid I should not. No, Diana must be perfectly free to make up her own mind. I cannot allow anything in the nature of an engagement. I am sorry about it; but there it is."

"That's final, then?" Michael asked, his heart as heavy as lead.

"Absolutely," said she with a nod. "I know it seems hard to you now; but later on, when you are older, you will see that we are only doing what is best for both of you. We are not deliberately trying to make you unhappy. There are objections to your marrying Diana, you must realize that."

"I know," Michael broke in. "It's the beastly money, or the want of it."

"Not merely money," said Aunt Margaret, looking at him. "There are other reasons, dear boy—reasons which I've mentioned before. I don't want you to feel bitter and unhappy. Why not be cheerful and make

Digitized by Google

up your mind to the inevitable? Two years is not so very long, after all."

"Cheerful!" Michael exclaimed. "You expect me to be cheerful? I'm not certain I don't wish I were dead!"

"You must not talk like that!" she retorted with some heat. "I think you had better go away and think things over by yourself calmly and dispassionately. Oh dear!" she sighed, rubbing her forehead, "you do give me such headaches!"

And Michael left her, resisting an impulse to slam the door behind him. He loved Diana with everything that was in him; but was told to go away and think things over calmly and dispassionately! How could he?

Would to God that he was rich and could leave the Service! If only he could have afforded it he might even persuade Diana to make a runaway marriage. But how could he do that when, with his allowance of sixty pounds a year from his father and Diana's annual one hundred and fifty, their joint income would be no more than three hundred and ninety pounds per annum?

As things were he found it difficult enough to struggle along on his pay and what his father gave him. By cutting down his expenses and denying himself everything he might be able to manage to give Diana enough to live upon with what money she had of her own; but what sort of a life would it be? Latterly she had been used to the best of everything—pretty clothes, travelling first class, anything she wanted. If she married him against Aunt Margaret's will she could not go on living at Marlings, obviously. And what would be the alternative? She would have to pinch and screw and count every penny, denying herself good food and clothes, possibly living in a single room in some ghastly slum like the wife of a working man.

No. The idea was too repugnant even to be seriously considered, and even if it were not how could he ask her,

Digitized by Google

as a newly married bride, to face a dismal separation of two years?

Aunt Margaret was right. There was nothing for it but to face the inevitable with as good a grace as they could muster, to steel their hearts to the pain of it and to hope for the best.

But the world seemed dark and very, very dismal as Michael went in search of Diana to break the news. The bottom seemed suddenly to have fallen out of the universe. There was nothing worth living for. Things looked utterly hopeless, and there was nothing he could do to make them better—nothing, nothing at all. Yesterday he had been more or less happy. To-day—Heaven help him to bear his affliction!

"It's China again, old girl," he said ruefully, finding Diana sewing over the fire in the deserted billiard-room. "I'm appointed to the 'Norfolk.' Isn't it perfectly sickening?"

He had made up his mind that there was nothing to be gained by beating about the bush. It might soften the blow for the time being; but he knew Diana well enough to realize she would prefer to be told outright. She was that sort of person.

Dropping her needlework she sat upright in the deep arm-chair and looked at him for a moment without speaking, with her lips tightly closed.

"China!" she breathed, with a little choking cry of distress as the full realization of the news burst in upon her. "Oh, Mike, dear!" Her eyes clouded over and her lips trembled.

Leaning forward with her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands she gazed into the heart of the fire trying to choke back her grief. But it was more than she could do. For months she had not been herself, and now, with the sudden shock, her self-restraint left her so that she became powerless to control herself. Her lips started to quiver ominously, and presently, as Michael watched, her eyes became liquid and a tear or

Digitized by Google

two sparkled on their long lashes. Then, with a little shudder, she buried her face in her hands and her body shook to her sobbing.

Michael fell to his knees beside her.

"Diana!" he whispered, his arms round her and his face pressed to hers. "Don't cry, darling girl!

He kissed her under the ear and tried to take the hands away from her face; but she resisted him.

"I c—can't help it!" she sobbed. "I m—must cry a little. I'll be all right in a m—minute!"

Rising from his knees Michael sat himself on the arm of her chair and leant over her.

"Put your arms round me," she whispered. "Don't leave go."

Her body shook as he gently gathered her to him.

"There, there," he said, miserably distressed himself. "Things will be all right in the end. I shall only be away for two years, and we've still got three weeks left."

Diana could not trust herself to answer; but lay quiescent in the comfort of his arms, with her head against his shoulder.

"Where's my hanky?" she breathed after a lengthy pause, sniffing and starting to regain control of herself.

"Have mine," he said, fumbling in his pocket. "It's clean."

"Sure?" she asked, looking up at him with a wan little smile and a very tear-stained face.

The question was justified, for Michael was in the habit of using his handkerchief for many purposes, from cleaning a gun to employing it as a paint rag.

He bent down to kiss her on both eyes and on her lips.

"I love your nose," he observed irrelevantly, kissing that also. "It's a priceless little nose—quite one of the best things about you."

"Give me the hanky," she said. "I'm sure I must look a horrid sight, and I feel an awful ass for crying."

"You never look a horrid sight," he replied, handing the handkerchief across. "Feel better now?"

Digitized by Google

" Yes," she said, dabbing her face and then proceeding to pat her hair. " Are my eyes very red ? Tell me."

She looked up at him.

" Not very," he said, tilting her head with a finger under her chin and scrutinizing them carefully. " They're jolly nice, anyway. They remind me of—er—well, mountain pools, I think." He had read that in a novel only three days before.

" Nice or not I shall have to go upstairs and bathe them before lunch," she observed. " And look what you've done to my hair, you naughty boy."

" Seems all right to me," he said, tucking away a curl with clumsy fingers.

" Ow ! " she exclaimed, moving her head aside. " Leave it alone, Mike. You'll make it worse than ever." A pause ; then : " Mike ? "

" Yes ? "

" Does Aunt M. know ? "

" Yes, I've just been seeing her."

" What did she say ? "

" Same old yarn," he answered, going on to describe the interview.

" I'm getting awfully tired of being here," she said sadly, when she had heard everything. " I know she'll be for ever harping on at me, and with you away things will be ten thousand times worse. Mike ? "

" Hullo ? "

" Suppose she made things so horribly unpleasant that I simply had to—to marry someone in self-defence ? "

Michael started. " What d'you mean ? " he inquired anxiously.

" I—I don't mean that I want to," she faltered. " I want to marry you, Mike, and I shall always love you, whatever happens. But suppose Aunt M. goes on and on at me until I can't help myself ? She's so frightfully determined and sometimes I feel I can't go on fighting her for ever. Every time she looks at me I know what's in her mind."

Digitized by Google

"That just the sickening part of it," said Michael very miserably. "I've been frightened of that all along, and now I'm going miles away to the back of beyond it will be worse than ever."

"But you know I don't want to marry anyone else, Mike?" she asked, after a pause.

"Of course, darling," he said, hugging her to him. "I think it would break my heart if you did."

"And mine too," she sighed. "Oh, Mike! Do you think things will ever come right?"

"Goodness knows!" he said disconsolately. "All we can do is to stick to each other in spite of everything. They can't force you to marry anyone else. But look here, old girl," he suddenly added, "I've got an idea. You know that friend of Kitty's who was staying here in the autumn?"

"Which one? She's got so many."

"That black-haired Miss—— Lord! I can't remember her name. But you know, the girl with a face rather like a horse and sticking-out teeth who'd started a shop and was making a good thing of it?"

"Do you mean Enid—Enid Wetherby?"

Michael nodded. "Yes," he said. "You rather liked her, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Diana. "I did. But what's the idea?"

"You know how she admired that evening-dress of yours—the white spangly one you made yourself?"

"Yes, I know she did," said Diana. "As a matter of fact, she spent a whole morning routing about in my room looking at things I'd made—a dress or two and some hats I'd trimmed and some—well, under things. She rather liked them."

"I know she did," said Michael. "And I've just remembered something she said to me."

"Oh!" Diana answered, rather interested, "what was it?"

"She said, as far as I can remember, that you had a jolly good eye for colour and for knowing what suited

Digitized by Google

people, and so on," he explained. "From the way she talked she seemed to think your taste was rather exceptional. Anyhow, she said to me, 'Your cousin's jolly clever,' or words to that effect. 'If she ever gets sick of being at home just you send her along to me.'"

"Go on, Mike, you're inventing!" Diana laughed, rather pleased, nevertheless.

"I'll swear I'm not," he retorted. "Why should I? Anyhow, if the worst comes to the worst and things get too unpleasant here why don't you write to Enid What's-her-name and ask if she'll take you on? She has no one but ladies."

"I couldn't, Mike! I know I've got fairly good taste and a bit of an eye for colour; but I'm nothing out of the ordinary—honestly I'm not."

"Well, why on earth did she go out of her way to say what she did?" he asked. "I'll swear she was perfectly serious."

"But Aunt M. would never hear of my living alone in London," Diana replied, rather horrified at the idea. "Just imagine her face if I suggested it."

"Blow Aunt M.!" Michael growled. "Enid What's-her-name would look after you, and I expect you'd live with her. She's old enough to be your mother, almost, and will never come to any harm with a face like that. She's got no people, I know, and has a flat of her own; and it isn't as if Aunt M. didn't know her. Besides, you've got your own money."

"A hundred and fifty a year isn't going to keep me," she pointed out.

"I dare say not," he said. "But a hundred and fifty plus what you earned would do the trick all right."

Diana pondered.

"It might be worth thinking of if the worst comes to the worst," she said at last. "But I doubt if I'd be much use, and Aunt M. would have hysterics if I suggested serving in a shop."

"Let her," said Michael fiercely.

Digitized by Google

"It's all very well to talk like that," Diana said. "But you know what peculiar ideas she has about what girls may and may not do. She'd—— Oh, gracious!" she broke off, freeing herself and springing up as a gong boomed in the hall. "There's lunch. I must fly and tidy myself."

She went towards the door; but halted and turned with her hand on the knob.

"Mike," she said softly, her eyes shining, "come here a moment."

"Well?" he said, going towards her.

"Put your arms round me and tell me what I want to hear," she whispered softly. "Quick, darling!"

Michael needed no encouragement.

A month later, at three o'clock in the morning, the "Norfolk" steamed into the Bay of Biscay. It was a dismal night, the sky blotted out in great masses of dark cloud driving in on the wings of the south-westerly gale, and a heavy sea, in which the ship rolled and plunged dizzily, with the great combers erupting over the forecastle and sheets of spray flying high over the bridge and battery.

The wind howled and the sea thundered. Wedged into a corner of the upper bridge by the standard compass, in streaming oilskins and with the salty taste of the spray in his mouth, Michael, whose middle watch it was, watched the light on Ushant fading gradually into the dim opacity away on the port quarter. It grew dimmer and dimmer, until at last it was swallowed up in the darkness, and nothing remained except the sombre expanse of sky and the tumult of the great ocean leaping and breaking in its fury.

Chilled to the bone, he felt a sudden loneliness. With the final dipping of Ushant light beneath the horizon England and Diana seemed somehow to have passed out of his life. It was hardly believable that only ten days before he had still been with her, for æons of time

Digitized by Google

seemed to have passed since their final good-bye on the platform at Charing Cross. He could scarcely picture her in his mind, hardly remember the sound of her beloved voice. He had her photograph in his cabin—many photographs; but somehow her image seemed to have faded in his mind until she had become something ghostly and intangible, something unattainable.

And every revolution of those inexorable, thudding propellers, every ounce of coal shovelled on to the furnaces by the half-naked, sweating men in the stokeholds carried him farther and farther away.

Michael Bray — *Chapter XXXIV*

THE year seemed to fly past, and when Christmas Day rolled round again to find the ship at Hong-Kong, and dances, picnics, golf, tennis, and other distractions in full swing, Michael could hardly bring himself to realize that already the "Norfolk" had been nearly a year in commission. But in that brief time he had seen more of the China station than he had during the whole of his service as a midshipman in the "Boreas."

Singapore and Hong-Kong were already more or less familiar, and so was Wei-hai-wei in North China, where the squadron spent some portion of the summer. But new ground was broken when they visited Tinghai, the principal town in the Chusan Archipelago, a cluster of islands lying off the mainland and not far to the southward of the mouth of the great Yang-tse-kiang.

Chusan, with its magnificent scenery of high peaks and landlocked waters studded with wooded and cultivated islands and islets, had a certain historic interest. It had been occupied by British troops in 1840 during the first China war, and had been held, off and on, for twenty years. And outside the large, straggling native city of Tinghai there was a reminder of the British

Digitized by Google

tenancy in the shape of a pathetic little walled graveyard containing the mortal remains of soldiers and sailors who had perished far away from their homes.

The city itself was a crowded, malodorous place of narrow streets and multitudinous shops and many ornate joss-houses containing huge, demoniacal-looking gods resplendent in red and gold lacquer. And lest the simple folk be tempted to wickedness, or to fail to produce the votive offerings of fish, flesh, fowls, rice, and vegetables whereon the well-being of the presiding priests depended, there were fearful model representations showing all the torments of the Chinese equivalent to hell, with pale-faced victims being sliced in pieces by ferocious demons, impaled upon spikes, boiled in oil, or crushed slowly to death in an enormous press not unlike a gigantic lemon-squeezer.

Few Europeans visited the islands, and except for the members of a Roman Catholic mission who kept a school for native children and carried on a noble work in cases of injury and illness among the natives, there were no resident white people.

There was an extensive trade in dried fish and poultry, rice, vegetables, and native goods, carried on by junks with the mainland; but practically the only commodity of European origin that Michael saw in his wanderings was a single bottle of Bass's ale, bearing the familiar red triangle. Obtained in the first instance from some visiting ship, it must have been there for years, and, enshrined as a curio, was valued so highly by its owner that he could not be persuaded to part with it.

The inhabitants were good-natured and contented and full of curiosity, though they soon came to realize that the "foreign barbarians" had money to spend and raised their prices accordingly. Crowds of goggling, dark-skinned little "cheesis"[1] with screwed-up pigtails, most of them mother naked and all with protuberant stomachs brought about by their rice diet, followed

[1] "Cheesi," a child.

Digitized by Google

hard on the heels of anyone who went ashore, clamouring for largess. It was impossible to get rid of them.

Michael and his messmates spent most of their leisure shooting, for there were duck and pigeon in plenty in most of the islands and snipe in the paddy-fields. The weather was perfect, and it was very pleasant to leave the ship in a hired *sampan* before daylight, to spend the entire day picnicking and wandering about with a gun, and to return to the ship after sundown agreeably tired and thoroughly muddy after one's labours. True, the bags were not very large, for the birds were wild and wary, while always the shooters were followed by an army of inquisitive natives, who shouted and halloed on the least provocation. They were always eager to help; but complete ignorance of their language was something of a disadvantage. Once, after a lengthy conversation, and having drawn on a piece of paper what purported to be a pheasant, Michael was tempted to trudge many miles out of his way to visit a patch of covert nearly at the top of a steep hill which, according to a voluble Chinaman, was full of pheasants. But his labour was in vain. Arriving at the spot after an exhausting climb in the heat of the day he found the wood contained nothing but a few magpies.

After Tinghai had come a two months' cruise completely round Japan, when, besides visiting the better-known ports of Nagasaki, Kobe, Yokohama, and Hakodate, the squadron touched at many little towns and anchorages where British ships had never been seen before. At nearly every place they called gifts were showered upon them and officers and men were enthusiastically entertained in honour of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. Not so many months before Japan had emerged triumphantly from the Russo-Japanese war. She was grateful for the moral support of her Western ally.

The meticulous way in which the entertainments were organized was typically Japanese. Everything was thought of beforehand and nothing left to chance.

Digitized by Google

Maps were even provided showing the local beauty spots and places of interest and where the various entertainments were to be held, while printed programmes giving a list of the speeches and the exact seating of the guests were circulated. As a matter of course carriages or rickshaws were always at the landing-place to take them to their destinations.

At Sasebo, a Japanese naval port, the British squadron steamed to their anchorage through lines of steam launches and junks and *sampans* filled with cheering school-children waving British and Japanese flags, while the town itself was decorated with flags and lanterns and triumphal arches, and the streets were thronged with masses of flag-waving people shouting " Banzai ! "

Some of the official banquets served in the European style were highly decorous and proper, with much bobbing and bowing and hissing of indrawn breath as a mark of respect, and meals of twenty-seven courses and lengthy speeches, all of which had to be translated in their entirety. But the purely Japanese dinners, of which there were many, and at which the British officers sat cross-legged and bootless on cushions on a spotless matting floor in front of little square tables laden with bowls and dishes of native food, were not at all formal. Every guest had a Japanese either side of him, while a *geisha* knelt before him and attended to his wants, feeding him, if necessary, with the unfamiliar chopsticks.

Contrary to popular belief in England, the greater number of *geisha* were girls of irreproachable character, and, trained in the art of entertainment and ceremonial, were attached to the tea-houses as dancers and singers, They were pretty, smiling, fragile-looking little women. with charming manners and a decided sense of humour, fascinating with their sleek, wonderfully coiffured heads, dark eyes, and beautiful silken kimono girded with the wonderful obi, or sashes, costing in some cases hundreds of yen and passed down from generation to generation as heirlooms.

Digitized by Google

If it had not been for Diana at home in England Michael might have lost his heart to one dark-eyed miss wearing a kimono of shaded grey silk *crêpe* embellished with storks and purple wistaria, and an obi of darker grey with black lining embroidered with sprays of almond blossom in reference to her name which, being translated, meant " Miss Almond Blossom."

" Her say she ' tink your face mos' pretty,' " translated a Japanese officer sitting on Michael's left. " Her like your hair, and want to know how many year you have."

Michael laughingly imparted his age.

" Her say she hope your fader and moder very well in health," the Japanese officer continued after a gabbled conversation. " Her ask how the Japanese food suit your lovely stomach ? "

" Tell her I like it very much, indeed," said Michael, trying to control his mirth and capturing a slippery morsel with his chopsticks. " And please tell her she is a very pretty girl and I like her very much," he added, gathering courage.

Shy giggles from the lady and a casting down of her eyes as she received the information. Another laughing conversation.

" Her say she like you very much and her much pleased at your presence dis memorable evening " . . . and so on and so forth.

But with the help of a Japanese naval officer who taught him certain useful phrases which he wrote down and committed to memory Michael eventually learnt enough to dispense with an interpreter.

During these dinners gifts were presented to all the guests—little lacquer boxes filled with sweets, and dwarf trees, diminutive teapots, fans, silk bags, and suchlike trifles. But it was after the meals that the real fun began, for in deference to the well-known custom of the English, the hosts organized " hunt the slipper " and leap-frog, in both of which diversions, regardless

Digitized by Google

of their best clothes, the ladies joined. Also they tossed each other in blankets, and it was amusing, to say the least of it, to see quite senior officers, including a sedate engineer-commander and the most respectable chaplain of the flagship, seized upon by a dozen laughing little women, pitched into a blanket, and hurled nearly to the ceiling with shrill screams of amusement.

It was impossible not to enter into the spirit of the thing. Even the unmarried commander-in-chief, a vice-admiral, a Knight of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath, and a stern disciplinarian with the reputation of a misogynist, was once seen sitting *in coram publico* with a *geisha* perched upon either knee. His arms were round their waists and they were solemnly stroking his beard. The surprising thing was that he seemed to be enjoying it.

"Lord!" whispered the junior officers, agog at the sight, "look at the C.-in-C.!"

In two months Michael suffered much concentrated entertainment and saw a great deal of Japan and its people. With parties of other officers he visited the training school for naval cadets at Etajima, in the Inland Sea, and in the naval dockyards went on board many of the shell-scarred prizes captured from the Russians. But, to tell the truth, the shoals of visitors and the perpetual round of entertainments and banquets soon palled, as did also the attentions of the "Welcome Committees," consisting usually of the local schoolmaster, the chief of police, and a leading inhabitant or two, generally without one word of English, who came on board at every place, however insignificant, and at any time of the day or night, to offer their felicitations and to bob and bow and hiss and sip beer and smoke cigarettes in the captain's cabin and wardroom for an hour or more at a stretch. Sometimes they brought presents with them—tooth-powder and tooth-brushes, soap, scent, bottles of sauce, fruit, and crates of Japanese beer, which last-named had very discreetly to be refused.

Digitized by Google

Orders had been promulgated throughout the country that the British were to be welcomed and treated as friends and brothers, and welcomed they duly were.

There followed a brief visit to Fusan, in the south-east of Korea, where there were entertainments given by the Japanese mayor and residents. Later on in the year, also, after a visit to Wei-hai-wei for gunnery practices, the squadron went to Chemulpho, another Korean port, whence the officers attended an official luncheon-party in Seoul, the capital, given by a Korean minister in honour of the Emperor of Korea's birthday.

To all intents and purposes the country was already a Japanese province and its Emperor a nonentity, and it was peculiar to compare the Japanese officers, smart and soldierlike in their useful khaki, with the officers of the comic-opera Korean army in their blue tunics, resplendent in medals and decorations and much gold lace and wearing *képis* of the French pattern and baggy scarlet trousers and elastic-sided boots. The food at this particular entertainment consisted of cold chickens and jellies and cakes and bottles of beer and claret, placed on long tables in a garden. There was no bread, no knives and forks, and it was something of an experience to indulge in a tug-of-war with a much-decorated field-marshal to the Korean army for the better half of a fowl; better still to see the same exalted personage eating jelly with his fingers and drinking beer out of a bottle.

Dalny, the ex-Russian town and seaside resort near Port Arthur, was another port of call, and it was from here that Michael and a party of other officers were taken to Port Arthur and conducted over the fortress. They wandered over the celebrated key position "203 Metre Hill," where the fighting had been particularly fierce and prolonged, and which, though once a smooth, grass-grown slope, was so pitted and scarred by high-explosive shell, so slashed by line upon line of trenches, that it resembled nothing more nor less than a gigantic heap of road metal

Digitized by Google

tumbled out of a basket. Most of the dead had long since been removed, but the place was still full of the debris of a battle-field, provision tins, remains of sand-bags and tattered uniforms, broken weapons, empty cartridge cases, clips and shell splinters in profusion. Every stone and every boulder seemed splashed with bullets or riven by shell, and here and there, where the burying parties had scamped their work, there still remained the grisly relics of what had once been men.

They were taken round the forts, which, after weary months of sapping and mining, had at last fallen into Japanese hands after ferocious fighting. Every inch of the ground had been contested fiercely. What had once been a fair and smiling countryside was scarred and hideous with the ravages of war.

And looking at the scenes of this awful fighting the recent war in South Africa seemed to fade into insignificance. Michael wondered to himself if European troops—British troops—would ever be capable of the fanatical courage and dogged endurance of the war-tried Japanese who had achieved such wonders in capturing this " impregnable " fortress from their Western enemy.

Before he was very much older his unspoken question was to be answered—and in the affirmative. Even the fighting at Port Arthur could never quite compare with the desperate warfare which continued on the Western Front for four long and agonizing years.

On the whole, the " Norfolk " was a happy ship, particularly in the relations between officers and men, which were excellent.

The captain, a warm-hearted, hospitable little man, was perhaps rather prone to sudden fits of irascibility for little or no apparent reason, during which he stamped his feet and cast his cap upon the deck and made things generally unpleasant. But he really meant nothing by it. Within an hour or two the incident passed completely from his mind, and the watchkeepers, upon whom

Digitized by Google

his displeasure was usually vented, soon learned the signs of any coming storm and became adept at steering clear of "the owner" when his evil moods were upon him. If he could not be avoided attempts at explanation only added fuel to the flames, and it was wise to confide one's remarks to "Yes, sir," "No, sir," and "Aye, aye, sir." But sometimes it certainly was a little difficult to keep cool, calm, and collected.

It was an unwritten law to make some observation as to the captain's mood when turning over the watch from one to another.

"Course, north forty-three east. Sixty-eight revolutions and we're logging a little over eleven knots. There are leadsmen in both chains and here's our noon position on the chart. The little man's quite affable. So long, old bird."

But sometimes it was "the skipper's a bit peevish this morning, so keep your weather-eye lifting."

The commander, a cheery soul and an excellent messmate, was sometimes rather addicted to spasms of "flagshipitis," as they called it, when the admiral happened to be present in harbour—frantic painting and holystoning and scrubbing and polishing of brasswork to make the ship more yachtlike than was strictly necessary; meticulous zeal in "following the flagship's motions" in regard to such things as spreading and furling and sloping awnings and side-screens, lowering and hoisting boats, tricing up and lowering washed clothes and hammocks. It mattered not at all if the "Norfolk's" hammocks and washed clothes were still far from dry. No sooner did the lines of hammocks and garments come fluttering down on the flagship's forecastle than the "Norfolk" followed suit, irrespective of any work in progress at the time. Such was the unwritten law of the old navy.

Michael's messmates in the wardroom were as good a lot as could be wished for. There were always those who were moody and depressed at breakfast and grunted

Digitized by Google

surlily on being wished " Good morning." And at times there were the petty squabbles and disagreements inevitable in a mess where over twenty people of different ages and temperaments were herded together at close quarters with no chance of working off their superfluous energy by regular exercise during long periods spent at sea. True, they played deck hockey in the dog-watches and boxed and wrestled and did gymnastics; but it was not enough.

Some people wanted standard works for the ward-room library and some preferred novels; some wanted to purchase a new piano and new music for the band and some did not; some thought the Chinese messman was a good caterer and others found fault with everything he put upon the table. There were endless bones of contention, even over the matter of the gramophone records. When there was nothing better to do a " cag "[1] could always be started about something, and the suggestion book became full of " growls " and opprobrious observations levelled at the mess committee.

But really, in their heart of hearts, they were not at enmity, and when it came to work were all very much united. Every one, regardless of his personal thoughts and grievances, was animated by one common belief—that the " Norfolk " was the best ship, not only on the China station, but also throughout the entire navy. Her reputation was the one thing that really mattered, and it was up to them, if they could, to beat every other ship in gunnery, in rapidity of coaling, in competitive drills, in general smartness, in games and boat-racing and everything else that really mattered. And thanks to their efforts, the ship was top of the entire navy one year in battle practice, whereat there was much rejoicing and ribald remarks at the expense of the flagship, who greatly fancied herself in the gunnery line.

The engineer-commander, a deeply religious man who objected to dances and other frivolities, who

[1] " Cag," i.e. an argument.

Digitized by Google

seemingly regarded all young officers as brands to be snatched from the burning, and who, even in the wildest spots, always wore a bowler hat if he went ashore on Sundays, was not exactly on peaceful terms with the fleet-paymaster, a red-bearded gentleman fond of gaiety and rejoicing in the nickname of " Fireworks."

What was the cause of their mutual dislike it is impossible to say; but as the junior members of the mess had formed a cabal to place both of them upon the mess committee, the meetings of that august party were usually distinguished by acrimonious discussion.

The fleet-paymaster egged on by the younger people, was anxious to spend some of the mess surplus in buying new pictures, repainting the mess, and in giving dances on board in return for hospitality received ashore. But the engineer-commander wanted none of these things. Pictures, or the sort of pictures that " Fireworks " would select, he abhorred, and dancing he regarded as positively sinful.

" How a man of your age can find any pleasure in skipping round with a girl in his arms young enough to be his daughter I can't imagine," he once remarked to his enemy. " I call it disgusting ! "

For a moment it seemed as if the fleet-paymaster would strike him, for his eyes flashed and his beard bristled.

" If you were a little more human it would be pleasanter for us all ! " he retorted, controlling himself with an effort.

" I've never danced in my life, and I'm not going to start now to please anyone," the engineer-commander hurled back with heat. " You needn't look to me for a subscription ! "

" Nobody wants it ! " retaliated " Fireworks." " But the sooner you retire to your blooming old monastery the better."

And the dances were given, even though the engineer-

Digitized by Google

commander either immured himself in his cabin for the occasion or else retired ashore.

Michael, though he thoroughly enjoyed life and found plenty to do, was not at all happy in his mind in regard to Diana.

She had left Marlings and was living with Miss Wetherby in London; but soon her letters to Michael became shorter and less spontaneous and frequent. She constantly excused herself on the score of being so busy and having so much to think about; but more than once had mentioned a brother of Miss Wetherby's and had talked of dinners and theatres, of Lord's and Ranelagh, and tennis and dances. Girls did not dance alone, and vaguely jealous and disturbed at not having heard for three mails in succession, a period of over a month, Michael wrote what was perhaps rather an injudicious letter.

"My dear Michael," she wrote tersely in reply, "you are very unkind and had no right to write to me as you did. We weren't properly engaged, and if you have friends and can go to dances and amuse yourself you can't blame me for doing the same. If you're jealous it's not my fault. I am beginning to think that perhaps after all we have been mistaken in each other.

"DIANA."

That was all. She gave him no words of love and affection, offered no reasons for not having written—nothing. Michael could hardly believe his eyes. It was so utterly unlike her to turn and rend a fellow like that.

"Perhaps we have been mistaken," she said. Did this mean that she wished to be rid of him?

Very miserable, he retired to his cabin with agony in his heart. He gazed sadly at her photographs, trying hard to persuade himself that she had written in a moment

Digitized by Google

of pique, and that he himself had been principally to blame for saying what he had.

Then he sat himself down to write to her, putting his thoughts on paper time and time again only to destroy the closely written sheets as hopelessly inadequate to the occasion. He poured out his heart and soul to her—telling her, in his tongue-tied way, that he loved her fiercely and adored her beyond anything else in the world; that if she went out of his life he would never get over it. He begged her forgiveness, implored and beseeched her to think things over and to tell him she still loved him. He was prepared to sacrifice anything for her, absolutely everything. Could she not understand his feelings a little?

For some time, alternately buoyed up with hope and plunged into the depths of woe, he waited anxiously for what the next mail from England might bring.

Surely, surely Diana would relent!

But the steamers came, the contents of the bulging mail-bags were served out and still there was no news from her. The suspense became intolerable. He seriously considered sending her a cable—would have had he known what to say and how to express himself.

Three weeks passed, when one afternoon, while he was ashore playing tennis, the report of a gun told him that the P. & O. steamer with the mail on board was in sight from the signal station at the Peak. Less than an hour later she was threading her way to her buoy through the vessels in the crowded anchorage.

With a strong premonition that that ship had brought him news of Diana, Michael broke off the game, hurried down to the pier, and went off to the "Norfolk" in a *sampan*, to find that the mail had already been distributed. Hastening to the wardroom he found several letters in his rack—one from his father, the usual bills from Reeves' and his bootmaker, a circular or two, and a letter on the thick, pale-blue paper affected by Aunt

Digitized by Google

Margaret and addressed in her sprawling handwriting. But there was nothing, nothing from Diana.

Michael felt physically sick.

Aunt Margaret was in the habit of writing to him about once a month, so there was nothing unusual in receiving a letter from her; but going to his cabin he tore it open just in the hope that it would contain news of Diana.

It did.

"My dear Michael," she said. "I am afraid I have very sad news for you, though I hope you will be brave and not think bitterly of Diana. She is engaged to Ronald Wetherby, Enid Wetherby's brother, a very good match for her, and is to be married in the spring. I know, dear boy, that this will come as a great shock to you, for you expected something else. But believe me it is all for the best. I can say now that I never thought you were really suited to each other, and the fact that you were first cousins was a very grave objection. Your Uncle and myself both send our fondest love, and we hope that some day before very long you will meet some nice girl who will make you very, very happy. Don't think hardly of Diana. Poor girl, she is feeling very miserable, for she is still very fond of you. She asked me to write this; but I think it would be wiser if you didn't write to her just at present.

"Your very affectionate aunt,

"MARGARET."

Michael wept.

Michael Bray *Chapter XXXV*

IT was early in the New Year, at one of the dances given on board the "Norfolk" at Hong-Kong, that Michael was introduced to a pretty, tawny-haired girl,

Digitized by Google

a little younger than himself, whom he had noticed at various functions ashore but had never actually spoken to. Beyond the facts that she was decidedly a "good-looker" and rather sought after, that her name was Chesterton, and her father had something or other rather important to do with one of the large commercial houses ashore with branches all over the East, he knew nothing about her.

But girls, at any rate pretty girls who danced well, were something of a rarity in Hong-Kong, where always the males preponderated. Moreover, Miss Chesterton had none of the pallor and lassitude common to girls who had lived for a long time in the East. There was colour and freshness in her cheeks. Her eyes sparkled with health, and she looked strong and energetic, with a pretty smile and a pair of soft, greyish-blue eyes that looked at one with sympathy and understanding. Her dress—something of silver and white and rather fluffy—was utterly beyond Michael's power of description; but it was very becoming and looked expensive, as indeed it was. It came from Paris.

Yes, she told Michael, talking spasmodically as they danced, she was only two months out from home. Golf? Oh, yes, of course, and lawn tennis too, not really well, perhaps, but just so-so. She'd skated a good deal in Switzerland and ski'd and luged. Yes, she was fond of dancing too—loved it, in fact, and this was her first dance on board a man-of-war and rather a novel experience. The men looked so much nicer in uniform than in ordinary evening dress, and how good the band was. How well they had polished the deck and arranged the flags and decorations. Yes—she was thoroughly enjoying it.

Michael was a good dancer. Not for a long while had he met anyone who danced quite so well as Miss Chesterton. She was just the right height, a few inches shorter than himself. There was no stiffness about her. Her movements were smooth and effortless, so well under control that she seemed as light as a feather.

Digitized by Google

But quite apart from her dancing Michael was rather fascinated. She was so simple and unaffected and utterly unspoilt, rather an unusual thing in a place where girls with any pretensions at all to prettiness were apt to have their heads turned by much masculine admiration. She was a good talker, too, and had interesting things to say, and Michael liked the rippling way she laughed deep down in her throat. Altogether she was very attractive, soft, and alluringly feminine.

"I enjoyed that," he said, when the band had stopped and they were sitting out together on the flag-draped shelter-deck.

"So did I," she confessed.

"Is your programme full?" he asked.

"No," said she, examining it. "I've got a few left."

"May I look?"

"Do," she said, handing it across with a smile.

"George!" he exclaimed. "You've got four left and all the supper dances. What a stroke of luck! D'you think I might bag the lot?"

"But aren't you engaged for any of them?" she asked, with a sidelong glance.

"As a matter of fact I am—for two of them," he had to admit, comparing her card with his own. "But I can jolly soon fix that. My programme's practically empty and my other partners won't mind changing round a bit."

Anything was better than missing a possible dance with Miss Chesterton.

"For goodness' sake don't make yourself unpopular on my account," she observed, smiling. "You may get into hot water, and I dare say I shall be able to get other partners."

"That's exactly what I don't want," said Michael blatantly. "I want 'em myself."

"Greedy person. You're very persistent."

"And why shouldn't I be? You don't really mind my having them, do you?" he queried, calmly scrawling his

Digitized by Google

initials in every vacant space before handing her programme back. "We seem to get on so awfully well together."

"It seems I'm not allowed to object." She laughed, not a bit displeased. "It's rather wicked of you, all the same."

"Oh, no, not really wicked. After all, the supper dances don't really count as we'll be feeding, so that only leaves four."

"I can't read your scribble," she remarked. "What are your initials?"

"M. B.," said Michael.

"Which, being interpreted——?"

Michael told her.

"Michael Bray," she repeated thoughtfully, looking at him with an added interest. "Now where on earth have I heard that name before?"

Michael said nothing; but looked at her, wondering vaguely to himself how she managed to look so fresh and cool while he felt hot and sticky, and already his second collar was beginning to show signs of disintegration. And how in the name of goodness did she keep the shining coils of hair piled up on her small head without visible means of support? It was so neat and tidy, and he liked the way it grew at the back of her neck. Also, she had rather a fascinating little mole just where her smooth throat curved away into her left shoulder.

"I know I've heard the name," she went on, wrinkling her forehead and drumming on her chin with the fingers of one hand while gazing at the deck and trying to concentrate. "I've seen you before, too. I'm certain of it."

"I don't think so," said Michael, shaking his head. "If we'd——"

"Ssh! Don't talk," she ordered. "I'm beginning to remember. Half a minute. Yes," she added, after a pause, looking him in the face again, "I think I've got it. What's that little medal you're wearing?" She

Digitized by Google

pointed at the miniature with its crimson and yellow ribbon hanging on Michael's mess jacket.

"Oh, I got that for the Boxer show in nineteen hundred," he told her, surprised at the seeming irrelevance of her question.

"And were you at Tientsin at all?" she went on to inquire, smiling mysteriously.

"I should jolly well think so!" he said. "I was a snotty then—a midshipman, that is."

"And about so high." She laughed triumphantly, raising her hand about four feet from the deck. "Altogether a most bloodthirsty person with an enormous cutlass thing and a huge revolver. I remember so well." Her smile was very friendly.

Michael stared at her in amazement.

"D'you mean—— You're—— Surely you're not Henrietta?" he exclaimed.

"Indeed I am," she answered, smiling at him with her eyes in a way that he remembered. "Henrietta, as large as life and twice as natural. Don't you recognize me?"

"Lord, who'd have thought it!" he said, looking at her face and her hair and her beautiful frock. "You've changed. You look so grown up, somehow, and I remember you in short skirts with your hair all flying loose and rather long black legs."

"Tut-tut," she said, laughing at the recollection. "I remember you as a very tired and grubby little person with an enormous appetite. You've grown since then, and your hair isn't half so curly as it was."

"Thank heaven for that!" Michael muttered.

"But Mummy and I rather liked it!" she protested. "It made you look so innocent and angelic——"

"Oh, Lord!" he groaned.

"It did, I tell you," Henrietta said. "And don't you dare to contradict. It made you look like a little cherub when your face was clean, and all the time you were the most bloodthirsty little wretch imaginable. Do you remember showing me the notches on your revolver?

Digitized by Google

Do you remember having a bath and a gigantic meal while Mummy and I routed you out a clean shirt and some socks of Daddy's? Poor little dear!" she added, her eyes very tender and soft. "You were so young and did so want someone to look after you."

Michael smiled and tried to change the subject. "D'you remember that dark cover you made for my straw hat?" he asked. "You were jolly good to me—jolly good."

"We rather liked you," she said softly. "We felt it was such a shame that you should be sent to fight and——"

"I should have been sick to death if I hadn't been," said Michael. "After all, size doesn't matter. I was sixteen!"

She smiled.

"But what happened to you?" he went on to ask. "After seeing you those three times——"

"Four times," she corrected. "The last time you came was just after the capture of the native city, when you brought a friend to tea—a fat, dark boy with a jolly face."

"What, old Tubby Barker?"

"I can't remember his name off-hand," she said. "But I'll look it up in my diary and let you know."

"And what happened to you after Tientsin? I went along to your house some time later and you'd gone."

Henrietta nodded. "Yes," she said. "Mummy and I went to Shanghai to join Daddy. He couldn't come to us, you see, and Mummy hadn't been very well, poor dear. It had been rather a trying time for her."

"I don't wonder," he replied, remembering the terrifying clang of the bursting shell, the ceaseless whistle and whine of rifle bullets, the awful, sickening stench of blood and corpses and burning houses, and the general beastliness. Never would he quite forget those long lines of sagging, bloodstained stretchers, with their swaying burdens, carried into the settlement after one of the

Digitized by Google

engagements. It was horrible to think that the girl with the tender eyes sitting so close to him had seen the ghastliness of war.

"I don't know how you ever stuck it," he said, looking at her. "A good many girls——"

"Don't let's talk about it," she said, with a little shudder of disgust. "I try hard to forget; but it always seems to come back. Can't we talk about something more cheerful?"

"Let's," said Michael. "When may I come and call?"

"You'd better come along and be reintroduced to Mummy," Henrietta said. "She'll remember you perfectly. She rather loved you, you know. Your voice and your curly hair and angel face reminded her so of Bob, my brother."

"I wish you wouldn't harp on about my beastly hair and face!" he objected. "Where's your brother now?"

"He's in the Indian Army. You know," she resumed, "Mummy and I have often talked about you and wondered what became of you; and now, after six and a half years, you turn up again at a dance. Strange, isn't it, how these things happen?"

"Jolly strange," he agreed, looking at her. "What have you been doing with yourself in the meanwhile?"

She had gone home to school in England in 1901, she told him. Her mother and father had been home once or twice during the next few years; but most of her holidays had been spent with relations. In 1904, when she was eighteen, she had put her hair up and had gone for a year to Paris. Then a couple of London seasons, Switzerland once for the winter sports, and the Riviera in the spring. Yes, she had had a gorgeous time—simply gorgeous—and had cost her father no end of money, dear old thing. What about Michael?

He told her.

"I wish I'd known you were at home," he said regretfully. "We might have seen each other now and then.

Digitized by Google

Oh, blow!" as the band on the quarter-deck below started to tune up for the next dance. "You're engaged for this, aren't you?"

She nodded.

"Well, I suppose I must go and make my peace with those partners I want to cut," he said, helping her to rise. "When we have our next dance, the third from now, I'll get you to introduce me to your mother."

"Of course I will," she said, taking his arm. "Mummy will be delighted. It's been awfully nice meeting you again, Mr. Bray——"

"Come off it!" he growled, half seriously.

"What's the matter?"

"You called me Mike six years ago," he said.

"Well, Mike, then," she said softly, looking up at him. "And what am I to be? Miss Chesterton's rather formal, isn't it?"

"Henrietta's an awfully pretty name," he said. "I like it; but you rather treated me as one of the family when we met before."

"Well?"

"Mayn't I just call you Mumps, as I used to?" he asked. "You don't look a bit mumpish, of course, but —well—I don't know. It was the first thing I ever called you."

"You may." She laughed. "Fancy your remembering."

Twenty minutes later, when Michael was introduced to the tall, gentle-eyed woman in early middle-age with snow-white hair who was Henrietta's mother, she held out her hand with a smile of pleased welcome.

"You needn't tell me who this is," she said, looking up into Michael's face with an expression exactly like her daughter's. "He's hardly changed a bit. I should have known him anywhere for that fierce little ruffian of a midshipman we met at Tientsin. Now, my dear boy—— I'm sorry," she apologized with a smile. "I suppose I

Digitized by Google

shouldn't call you that as you're a lieutenant, even though I am old enough to be your mother."

"I don't mind a bit," said Michael awkwardly.

"Well you certainly were a funny little morsel in those days," she continued. "You reminded me so of our son, and still do, except that he's now grown a moustache. But Hetty tells me you've been out here nearly a year. Why, may I ask, haven't you been to see us?"

"I didn't even know your surname," Michael explained regretfully. "And I never dreamt for a moment you lived in Hong-Kong."

"Well, you must come and see us very often to make up for it," she said kindly. "Just send us a note, or telephone, or write to Hetty, and come whenever you like and to any meal. If you want to spend a day or two ashore we can always put you up, so please make use of us. I mean it, mind," she added, tapping him on the arm with her fan. "I shall be most offended if we don't see you. I know what it is for young people to be in a strange place and to have no friends ashore."

"I shall love it," said Michael gratefully. "It's very kind of you."

"Take me at my word, then," she smiled. "Hetty will tell you where we live and all about us. And now, young things, run away and enjoy yourselves. I see Captain Trevor looking for me. He's promised me some supper, and I'm hungry."

Again Michael murmured his thanks. Really, Mrs. Chesterton was almost as charming as her daughter.

"I told you Mummy would make a fuss of you," said Henrietta later on in the evening, as they danced together. "She loves young people and is an awful dear."

"I knew that the moment I saw her," said Michael. "And I knew—well, that you were too," he blurted out, turning his head for a moment to look at her face.

She did not seem to mind.

"That sounds rather like a compliment," she said shyly.

Digitized by Google

" It was intended as such," he confessed.

" I wonder if you really mean it ? "

" Bet your life I do," said Michael, perfectly serious. " I say—Mumps ? "

" Well, Mr. Mike ? "

" You're a very companionable sort of person, you know."

" Worse and worse." She laughed.

" But I mean it," he persisted. " Honestly I do. Can't we go and sit out somewhere ? I've got such lots of things I want to talk about."

" It certainly is rather hot," she agreed. " And that huge supper you insisted on my eating—well, I vote we do."

They did.

For the first time since he had left home Michael was completely happy. Diana seemed to have faded utterly from his mind. He bore her no grudge at all.

Long, long ago, he suddenly remembered, when he was a boy and Henrietta a mere slip of a girl in short frocks, she had spontaneously flung her arms round his neck and kissed him, while he, very uncomfortable and sheepish, had kissed her back. How he wished she would do it again. He wouldn't be bashful about returning it. On the contrary. She was a delicious person and delightful to talk to, so sympathetic and understanding. He felt he had known her all his life.

In the three weeks that remained before the " Norfolk " sailed from Hong-Kong on her next cruise to the southward their friendship grew apace. They played tennis and golf without the unwelcome surveillance of a chaperon. They went on Sunday picnics in steam launches to outlying islands with crowds of other people, ate prodigious lunches and teas, played rounders and " two's and three's " on sandy beaches, and came back singing in the dusk, tired out but very happy. They danced together a great deal, and Michael spent many days and had many meals at the great, cream-coloured

Digitized by Google

house half-way up the hillside towards the Peak which was Henrietta's home. Once or twice she and her mother had come on board to lunch and to tea.

They were happy days. She was " Mumps " and he was " Mike," and neither her father nor her mother, who were sensible and believed in giving young people their heads, seemed to mind. Mr. Chesterton, indeed, was every bit as kind to Michael as his wife, calling him " my boy " as if he had known him most of his life.

But all good things must come to an end. At last came the day when, early in the morning, the " Norfolk " slipped from her buoy and steamed slowly down the crowded harbour on her way towards the Lyemun Pass and the open sea beyond. Michael, on the quarter-deck, kept his telescope levelled on the balcony of a house half-hidden among the trees ashore, where stood the white figure which was Henrietta. She waved, and went on waving until the ship was out of sight.

They had said good-bye the night before, and she had seemed very sad at his departure.

" You must be sure and write to Hetty sometimes and let us know how you are getting on," Mrs. Chesterton had said, patting him gently on the shoulder. " Au revoir, dear boy, and look after yourself. Hetty will miss you, I'm sure; but we shall look forward to seeing you again."

Blessed words! They meant a lot to Michael.

" Yes, I shall miss him," said Henrietta in a small voice, looking at him with shining eyes in a way that he had never seen her look before.

Michael's heart jumped.

Mrs. Chesterton turned to look at her daughter with a strange expression on her face. Her eyes were very kind, and she was smiling softly.

" I—I wish you weren't going, Mike," the girl went on. " Mind you write. Don't forget."

Write, said Michael, longing to take her into his arms, of course he would.

Digitized by Google

The cruise was to last nearly three months, and by the time the ship returned to Hong-Kong the Chestertons would have gone on a visit to Shanghai. Later they were touring in Japan, and then were going to Wei-hai-wei to escape the heat of the summer. Michael might possibly meet them in Japan ; but certainly at Wei-hai-wei in five months' time if the " Norfolk's " programme was adhered to. Pray Heaven that nothing would crop up to upset it !

Five months ! It seemed an age.

There was a large photograph of Henrietta in Michael's cabin and many snapshots of her taken by himself. Also, she had knitted him a tie with her own fingers and embroidered a cushion for the head of his bunk. Neither were perfect to anyone except Michael, for she hated knitting and was better at games than as a needlewoman—but it was gorgeous to have them, gorgeous to think that she was sufficiently interested in him to take such trouble on his account.

Also, in a dated envelope in the small drawer among Michael's ties, there was a knot of pale blue velvet ribbon off one of her dresses. It had been torn off at a dance and she had asked him to put it in his pocket. He had omitted to return it and she had not reminded him. Sheer sentimentality, he told himself ; but it was something of hers, something she had worn.

Michael had told Henrietta of Diana and his great disappointment, as he felt it was only honest to do. But they had never talked of love as between themselves—had never gone beyond the stage of shaking hands and looking at each other and loving each other's company. With someone else so recently in his thoughts Michael felt that any protestation of undying affection would seem false and insincere, rather as though he were a male flirt, one of those detestable people who were never happy without some girl or another in tow.

Instinctively he endeavoured to analyse his feelings, to compare what he had formerly felt towards Diana with what he was now experiencing with Henrietta. Diana he

Digitized by Google

had known since childhood and had got used to. In course of time his boyish fondness had gradually ripened into love, so that he had come to regard her as absolutely necessary to his happiness. He had been miserably unhappy when she had gone out of his life, though now he had met someone else he no longer regretted it.

With Henrietta it was rather different. On seeing her years before he had liked her in an ordinary kind of way, and in the interval had hardly thought of her at all. But on meeting her again, even before he knew who she was, he had felt a peculiar fluttering in his heart as he looked at her, an indescribable, joyous feeling of uplift and blessed contentedness in her company. It was not merely because she was attractive and because she looked at him in a friendly sort of way and seemed to understand him. Nor had it come about because he wanted to be consoled for the loss of Diana. On the contrary, the feeling was instinctive, sudden, and overwhelming—something thrilling and utterly different to anything he had ever experienced before, far too subtle and wonderful ever to be put into words.

But Henrietta, Michael felt, was not the sort of person to be taken by storm. He knew she liked him ; but then she had hosts of friends with whom she was on intimate terms. And this time Michael wanted to make no mistake, to be firmly convinced in his mind before declaring himself that his affection was no mere evanescent fancy.

There was also the mundane question of ways and means. He hadn't very much to offer, and Henrietta's people seemed appallingly well off. He was a little alarmed at their probable objections if their only daughter chose to ally herself with a moneyless naval officer with little in the way of prospects.

But bless Aunt Margaret for her persistence! She was right, after all.

Digitized by Google

THE "Norfolk's" cruise to the southward was an interesting one, far off the beaten track.

Singapore—thence across the Line and through the Banka Straits between lofty Banka Island on the one hand and the low coast of Sumatra on the other, both picturesque and densely wooded. The weather intensely hot and damp, far hotter than they had ever experienced before, with much thunder and heavy tropical rain.

On to the southward across the Java Sea, through the Straits of Sunda, and past the cone of Krakatoa. They looked at the great pile with awe and some reverence, for in 1883, with many other volcanoes, it had erupted with great violence to desolate most of the island of Java. Mountains were split asunder and others disappeared, many new craters and islands being flung up and formed in the course of a single day. The submarine disturbance caused great tidal waves which destroyed entire towns and engulfed islands and lighthouses. The loss of life was roughly estimated at thirty-five thousand, and atmospheric and other disturbances extended over many thousands of square miles. Even in England the intensely red sunrises and sunsets observed for months afterwards were attributed by scientists to volcanic dust projected by the eruption on the other side of the globe.

The ship steamed on into the Indian Ocean and to Christmas Island, some two hundred and twenty miles to the southward of Java. It was one of the many islands of this name scattered throughout the world—twelve hundred feet high, twelve miles across at its widest part, with a coastline of precipitous cliffs and ragged, stony beaches. Densely wooded with papayas, pomegranates,

Digitized by Google

guavas, bastard teak, and other vegetation, it had been annexed to the British flag in 1888 on account of its rich deposits of phosphate, the soil being impregnated with guano to a depth of twenty-five feet.

The population, when Michael visited it, consisted of about a thousand coolies with a few white men in charge, together with a resident magistrate and a handful of Indian police. There was no proper anchorage, and the "Norfolk" lay off the island under steam, the cliffs themselves being so "steep to" that there were thirty fathoms of water within one hundred and fifty yards of the water's edge and a thousand fathoms and more a mile from the shore. The raw phosphate was conveyed in trollies to the edge of the cliffs and finally tumbled down chutes into the holds of vessels lying at rough stone wharves below.

The island was a dependency of the Straits Settlements, and once a year was visited by a man-of-war having on board an inspecting official of the Government. Ashore it was unromantic enough, with thick jungle and scores of coolies labouring amidst clouds of acrid dust in the workings. But viewed from the sea it looked a veritable paradise, intensely green, like some gigantic emerald set in the midst of a sea of sapphire velvet, with a background of sky of the palest turquoise.

It was the haunt of the piratical frigate birds, which, strong on the wing and too lazy to seek their own food, circled like dots in the heavens until they saw the lumbering "boobies" flapping slowly homeward to their nests with fish. Falling like a plummet the marauders darted at their foolish victims, so terrifying them as to cause them to drop their prey. Then, pursuing their downward flight with closed wings, they intercepted the falling fish before they touched the water. The boobies certainly deserved their name for allowing themselves so to be despoiled of their food. They were the silliest birds imaginable, so simple and unsuspecting that they could even be captured by hand on alighting in the rigging.

Digitized by Google

There were also the beautiful " boatswain birds," in gorgeous plumage of orange and black with the pointed tails like marline-spikes from which they derived their name, and enormous fruit pigeons almost too portly to fly. But, above all things, Christmas Island was most remarkable for its land crabs, hideous monstrosities of a reddish-brown colour with white markings, armed with enormous claws and anything up to eight inches across the shell. They were uncanny creatures, and lived there in such numbers that, during the mating season, when males and females together migrated from their abodes in the woods and hillsides to deposit the eggs on the beaches where presently they were hatched out by the sun, they resembled armies of ants. They were fierce, too, devouring everything in their line of march and waging a ceaseless war upon the rats.

Then on for another five hundred miles to the Keeling or Cocos Islands, a rarely visited group in the Indian Ocean six hundred miles from Java and sometimes sighted by the liners plying between Colombo and Fremantle in Western Australia.

North Keeling Island, upon which the German cruiser " Emden " was afterwards to be driven ashore by the " Sydney," was uninhabited and in no way remarkable ; but fifteen miles to the southward lay the coral atoll surrounded by a ring of about twenty small islets forming a circle roughly in the shape of a horseshoe. Here was the settlement and the cable station of the Eastern Telegraph Company.

Nowhere more than twenty feet above low-water mark and all densely wooded with coco-nut palms, the islands were really the serrated edge of an extinct volcano rising abruptly from the floor of the ocean. The central lagoon, gradually filling up with coral, was available only as an anchorage for small craft. So steep was the descent into deep water on the outside of the reef that the " Norfolk's " anchor lay in fifteen fathoms, her bridge in one hundred and seven, and her stern in one hundred and eighty.

Digitized by Google

Originally discovered by a Captain Keeling of the East India Company's Service in 1608, the place had remained uninhabited until 1825, when a Scotsman named Ross, the forefather of the owner at the time of Michael's visit, anchored in the lagoon to effect some repairs to his ship. Finding the island unoccupied he returned to Scotland to induce some of his countrymen to come out as colonists. His efforts did not meet with success; but so confident was he that there was money to be made in copra [1] and bêche-de-mer,[2] that, in 1827, he returned with his entire family and settled. It was not until thirty years later, however, that the group was definitely annexed to the British flag.

At the time of the "Norfolk's" visit the population consisted of nearly seven hundred souls—the descendants of the original owner and his family numbering fourteen, there being six hundred Cocos-born islanders and the rest imported Bantamese coolies. The coco-nut provided the staple industry and article of commerce, the copra being sent to Batavia at regular intervals in the family's schooner, and thence, in specially chartered steamers, to Europe. Provisions, clothing, and tools were brought by the schooner on her return journey, and were kept by the Ross family and sold to the natives as required. Boat-building was also carried on, a vessel of one hundred and eighty tons having been constructed, while the natives were expert fishermen.

The pure Cocos-born inhabitants were fine specimens of a pale coffee-colour, deep-chested and muscular, while their women, who carried themselves well, were remarkably handsome. To every man was apportioned his own plot of ground, and building materials, so far as the coco-nut tree provided them, could be obtained for nothing. Coco-nuts for private use could be obtained in certain places at stipulated times and the fish with which the

[1] Copra. The pounded-up flesh of the coco-nut from which oil is eventually extracted.

[2] Bêche-de-mer. The edible sea-slug, or sea-cucumber, greatly esteemed by the Chinese as a table delicacy.

Digitized by Google

lagoon abounded could be caught at any time. The natives, some of whom wore European clothes, took a great pride and interest in their homes, many using knives and forks and decorating their houses with ornaments and pictures. The gardens were gay with flowers, roses and honeysuckle abounding. The chief pest was the rats, which did much damage to the poultry and ducks.

There was no regular police force, though night-watchmen selected in turn from among the inhabitants perambulated the settlement at night to examine the boats at their moorings and to inspect the fires in the houses. Sanitary regulations were rigidly enforced, habitual offenders being fined a sum varying with the degree of their offence.

The Bantamese coolies were imported from Batavia, and besides the usual privileges received allowances of rice, firewood, coco-nut oil, salt, and medicine without payment. No islander would marry a coolie, and if a Bantam had conducted himself well and was in a position to support a wife he could request Mr. Ross to procure him a suitable damsel from Batavia. In some cases the labourers never saw their wives until the day of their marriage, though, if they had a good credit balance, they were sometimes permitted to go to Batavia in the schooner to select the lady for themselves. On the arrival of the schooner with the women on board the applicants made their choice in order of priority, and, after being married by Mr. Ross, signed the register and set up housekeeping. This system of marriage seemed peculiar, to say the least of it; but domestic discord was rare and divorce absolutely unknown.

The Keeling Islands, indeed, were a species of modern Arcadia. There were no police, no serious crimes, no trades unions, and no strikes. Mr. Ross was king and doctor and parson and magistrate and merchant all rolled into one. Remote from civilization, his word was law, and the friendliness, well-being, and content of his

Digitized by Google

subjects afforded a striking object-lesson to many a more enlightened kingdom.

From time to time the islands were visited by severe cyclones, which wrought havoc among the plantations, and even during her short visit the "Norfolk" had a taste of what they could be like.

On the day of her arrival it was blowing fresh from the south-east with a heavy swell which broke with a sound like thunder on the coral barrier close under her lee. By early next morning wind and sea had increased and the ship was pitching and rolling violently at her anchor. At the same time the barometer was falling fast, and at noon, by which time heavy squalls had started to drive down from windward and the sky was becoming overcast, the ship weighed anchor and stood out to sea for safety.

Between six and seven in the evening the wind suddenly lulled, and then, in the space of less than an hour, flew round to the north-west and started to blow with redoubled strength. The "Norfolk," indeed, had passed through the very centre of the cyclone, for such it soon turned out to be.

Shortly before eight there came a violent squall accompanied by sheets of rain and vivid lightning. The sea, already large, rapidly increased, and within the space of a few minutes the great masses of water, leaping confusedly in every direction with no ordered rhythm, were breaking heavily on board. The nature of the seas gave the ship no chance of rising and falling to avoid them. Buffeted simultaneously forward and aft and amidships by mountains of water raising their foaming heads alongside and tumbling down in ruin, she reeled madly in a jerky, uncontrolled wallow, half pitch and half roll, trembling to the giant blows as though smitten with a titanic hammer.

Soon it was pitch dark, so dark that it could almost be felt. The air became full, not of ordinary spray, but of sheets of solid water filched bodily from the wave-tops and carried along the surface, so that looking to wind-

Digitized by Google

ward was impossible. The wind seemed literally to batter the breath from one's body, to beat one flat, and in the crashing uproar of the breaking seas and the booming screech of the tempest even shouted conversation was inaudible. Michael had never experienced anything like it. It was like being drowned beneath a thousand waterfalls.

The " Norfolk," battened down fore and aft, was slowly steaming head to wind. Soon before ten o'clock, without the least warning, the bottom seemed suddenly to be ripped out of the universe by a terrific squall which snapped off the stout wireless spar at the main-masthead and brought it crashing down alongside. The motion became more violent and the sea more confused. The twin propellers raced madly as the stern lifted and they were flung out of water. A great wave, leaping on board amidships, completely buried the waist in a flood of surging water, smashed a boat to splinters, and poured in torrents through the ventilators into the stokeholds and engine-room below. Mess-decks and officers' quarters were flooded, furniture, mess-tables, stools, and personal property being cast madly hither and thither with the movement of the ship.

Michael had experienced a good deal of bad weather in his time; but never could he have imagined the awful spectacle of this maddened sea in the baleful glare of the forked lightning. The giant hummocks, without ordered motion, their sloping faces streaked with foamy lather like delicate lace, rose and fell steeply in all directions—reared their whitened heads alongside, tottered, curled over, and descended on board with a series of thudding crashes which shook the ship to her very keelson.

It was a magnificent spectacle. The mightiest work of man seemed so puny and insignificant as compared with the titanic fury of the elements; but the " Norfolk," battered and pounded, her bridge splintered, funnels caked with salt, deck fittings carried away, and officers and men drenched through, spent and weary, struggled

Digitized by Google

through the awful night in safety until, with the first signs of dawn, the sky cleared as if by magic and wind and sea started to subside. There was not a dry place in the ship; but soon came the glorious sun.

It is unnecessary to describe the other places visited—Pulo Weh, the Dutch island off the northern end of Sumatra; Penang; Malacca, with the remains of the old Dutch forts dating from 1551; Singapore again. Thence across the South China Sea to Labuan, and on to Jesselton and Kudat in North Borneo, places which Michael principally remembered for the blazing heat, the dark-skinned Malays, the few white inhabitants who flocked eagerly on board to see their countrymen, and the many, many coco-nut palms and hills and valleys covered with the densest vegetation.

They steamed back to Hong-Kong and thence, early in May, to Takau and Anping in Formosa, and Makung, in the Pescadores Islands. Japan again, Chemulpho in Korea, Shan-hai-kwan in the Gulf of Pechili, where the officers returned from an afternoon ashore with the stern-sheets of the cutter filled with grey bricks filched from the Great Wall of China.

There followed six weeks at Wei-hai-wei and then another visit to Japan, by which time everybody was heartily sick of the country. Then across the Sea of Japan to Vladivostok, where there were the usual official banquets, a great and wonderful ball given by the Russian Port Commandant, and entertainments for the men.

In the course of his wanderings Michael had been on board many foreign men-of-war and had seen something of their officers. There were the Americans, with their rather free-and-easy manners, whose ships were fitted with such luxuries as laundries and electric potato-peelers and dish-washers. They were supposedly "dry," though when one called on board one was usually conducted to somebody's cabin to "see a picture," and cocktails, very potent, were produced from a locked cupboard. The

Digitized by Google

French, generally bearded and old-looking for their seniority, were meticulously polite and proffered sweet champagne to drink to the *Entente Cordiale*, while the Japanese noisily drew in their breath and bowed and asked the strangest questions while offering *saké* in tiny cups and pale green tea tasting like watered straw. The German ships were always very clean and efficient, and the officers, in their tight-waisted frock-coats, clicked their heels in unison and, very much on their dignity, rarely seemed to unbend to foreigners. The Austrians were the direct antithesis, friendly and most companionable; the Italians much the same.

It was at Wei-hai-wei, soon after the visit to Vladivostok, that Michael met Henrietta again. He had not seen her for over six months. It had seemed an eternity; but his mind was made up. He was sure of himself.

Michael Bray — *Chapter XXXVII*

HENRIETTA, seated near the summit of the hill with her back against a boulder and her hands folded in her lap, silently drank in the view. Close beside her, Michael, prone on the sunbaked ground with a hand supporting his chin, reflectively chewed a blade of grass while admiring her profile clear-cut against the intense blue of the sky.

Dressed completely in white, and wearing a shady panama with a broad ribbon, she was certainly delicious to look at. He loved her mobile face with its clear complexion and expressive eyes, loved the smooth contour of her chin and neck falling away to the gentle curve of her bosom beneath her thin *crêpe de Chine* blouse. There was something fascinating, too, in the little tendrils of hair curling away at the nape of her neck and in the hardly perceptible golden down on her smooth rounded arms, bare to the elbows and slightly sunburned. He liked what little he could see of her silk-clad ankles beneath

Digitized by Google

the hem of her pleated skirt, and never before had he noticed that she possessed dimples where her elbows ought to be.

They had spent most of the morning playing golf on the links below, with the tees and putting greens of beaten mud as hard and as smooth as a billiard-table; but watching Henrietta was better than any game. Michael felt he could go on looking at her for ever. She was so satisfying to the eye, so cool and fresh, so soft and adorably feminine.

Below them the arid slope, destitute of trees and covered with boulders and coarse grass, quivered in the heat of the sun. Half a mile down the clustered habitations of a picturesque Chinese village nestled in a shallow fold in the hills. Beyond came the line of yellow beach frilled with breaking ripples and the broad expanse of the harbour ruffled by the slight breeze, until the water, over its sandy bottom, resembled a gigantic sheet of transluscent enamel splashed in every variety of blue and green over a sheet of shining gold. The colours ranged from indigo to lapis lazuli and brilliant sapphire, from deep viridian to malachite and shining emerald and greenish-golden chrysoprase, with here and there a touch of amethyst.

Away to the right, almost hidden by the land, three grey cruisers lay idly at their anchorage, and, nearer in, a couple of slim, white destroyers. The big ships, conspicuous with their tall, upstanding funnels and white awnings and side-screens, were surrounded by *sampans*, and now and then the sound of bugles, mellowed by the distance, travelled to where Henrietta and Michael sat. Presently, as noon came and the ships' bells struck eight, they could hear the shrill twittering of the boatswains' mates as the ships' companies were piped to dinner.

The broad bay was dotted here and there with native craft with their brown sails. Beyond, three or four miles distant, came the mainland with the town of Port Edward on the foreshore in a fold in the hills, and, farther afield,

Digitized by Google

a long serrated line of rugged, purplish-blue peaks rearing their gaunt heads against a sky of the palest turquoise. The mountain ranges stretched from right to left across the horizon, and so clear was the atmosphere that they could see for thirty miles, possibly more. It was overpoweringly hot with a brazen sun beating down from a cloudless sky: Wei-hai-wei in summer.

Little beads of moisture stood on Michael's forehead; but Henrietta, though breathing a little faster than usual, showed no signs of feeling the heat. Not a hair was out of place. She looked as charming and as cool as ever. Some girls, Michael thought to himself, would have been red-faced and panting after their climb, as shiny as a new silver dollar.

"I love distances," she said at last, with a little sigh of content, turning her head to look at him. "I'm glad you brought me here, Mike."

"I thought you'd like it," he answered, still nibbling his grass with his eyes upon her.

"Just look at the gorgeous colour of the sea," she went on, pointing. "It's like shot silk, and if anyone painted it like that people would say—— But you're not looking at it, you hopeless person." She broke off, turning towards Michael to see him gazing at her.

"I much prefer looking at you," he observed. "I can look at scenery pretty nearly every day of my life. I've only had eight days of you up to date, and I feel I——"

"There's no accounting for taste," Henrietta interrupted.

Michael snorted derisively. "My taste's excellent," he said. "Anyhow, I can't help knowing we've only got eleven more days together before we sail on that beastly cruise to Japan. Oh, curse Japan!" he added fiercely. "I'm fed up with it—fed up to the back teeth, and overflowing!"

The girl did not reply.

Digitized by Google

" What's up ? " he queried after a pause. " Why are you looking at me like that ? "

" I was thinking, Mike," she said solemnly, eyeing him with a smile.

" Thinking what ? "

" Oh, nothing much."

" Tell me," he persisted.

" If you really wish to know, I was wondering what you'd be like when you are fifty."

Michael laughed. " Bandy legs, as bald as a coot, a protuberant tummy, and a martyr to gout and dyspepsia," he said. " Altogether a horrible sight. Twenty-five years hence. I wonder what it feels like to be fifty. Do people still enjoy life, d'you think ? "

" I'm sure they do," she answered. " Look at Daddy and Mummy."

" But they're so well preserved," he said, " and——"

" I must tell 'em that," Henrietta chuckled. " They'll be charmed to hear it."

" For the Lord's sake don't ! " he objected. " They won't love me any more if you do. Anyhow, they've got pots of money and can enjoy themselves. When I'm fifty I shall either be a retired lieutenant with a white-washed cottage and a pig and a cow and some roses and things——"

" And a wife," Henrietta put in.

" Possibly a wife," he admitted.

" No, no," she said firmly, shaking her head and smiling. " I insist upon the wife. Who else is going to darn your socks and things ? "

" What about a housekeeper ? " Michael suggested. " One of those nice, rather fat old things in tight black sateen with red cheeks and a black apron thing with a bunch of keys round her middle ? "

" I'm afraid it wouldn't do." She laughed. " It will have to be a wife or nothing. But what's the alternative if you haven't left the navy ? "

" I suppose I should still be struggling on trying to

Digitized by Google

make two ends meet on my pay," he said dolefully. "I shall never be decently well off, worse luck."

"But money's not everything, Mike."

"It makes a deuce of a difference sometimes," he said.

"How?" she asked.

"Well, Mumps," he explained, "naval officers nowadays don't really get what you can call a living wage, and jolly few of 'em have much beyond their pay. Some of us get small allowances from our people; but not all. Anyhow, supposin' a fellow meets a girl and wants to marry her and she hasn't got a bean in the world? If they do get spliced it means piggin' it in rooms in Southsea or some ghastly naval port like Chatham, and having to count every shilling. Heaps of 'em do it, I know; but it's a rotten sort of show for their wives. Lord, haven't I seen it! Haven't I seen the wives scrimping and screwing and trying to keep up appearances on nothing at all and without even getting enough to eat? And supposin' the man is ordered abroad, he can't take his wife with him—can't afford it."

"But supposing he falls in love with a girl who's got a little money of her own?" Henrietta asked. "Or suppose, for the sake of argument, her people can give her an allowance? What then?"

"That's almost as bad as before," said Michael with a despondent shrug of his shoulders. "What chap with any sense of pride could go to a girl's people and say, 'Look here, I'm in love with your daughter. I want to marry her, but I haven't a stiver in the world beyond my pay. Will you finance us?' They'd probably boot him from the house!"

"I think you take rather an exaggerated view," she said.

"But, blow it all, Mumps, nobody likes to proclaim himself a pauper!"

"Nobody wants him to, you old silly! I see what's at the back of your mind, though."

"Oh!" said he. "And what's that?"

Digitized by Google

"You think people would say he was after the girl's money."

"I never said so," he objected.

"But you thought it, all the same," she said, nodding at him. "Don't you understand that people don't fall in love with each other because of what they have or haven't? They do it because they can't help themselves —because they meet someone they feel they can't get on without, and because they want to——" She hesitated. "Well, to be with them for ever and ever, amen. Oh, Mike, can't you see and understand a little what I'm driving at?"

Her voice was very soft and full of a new tenderness. She was looking at him in a way that she had never looked at anyone before; but Michael was too obtuse to notice it.

"Can't I see and understand what?" he asked bluntly, sitting up.

"How dense and obstinate you sometimes are," she parried, smiling at him. "Do you honestly mean to tell me that if you were in love with someone and then discovered she was, well, say moderately well off, you wouldn't ask her to marry you?"

"I dunno'," he said slowly. "It rather depends. For instance, take your own case."

Henrietta's heart jumped.

"Well?" she asked almost eagerly, averting her eyes.

"Your people are well off," Michael explained. "You've been used to having everything you wanted all your life. Do you think you'd be happy as the wife of a penniless naval officer?"

"It would depend entirely on who he was," she said slowly. "If I really loved him I don't think somehow it would make any difference."

"I couldn't imagine you making your own dresses and living in two rooms with a beast of a landlady, and wondering if you could afford kippers for breakfast, or only dry bread," said Michael. "Heavens, Mumps! I should hate to think of your having to do that."

Digitized by Google

" As a matter of fact there wouldn't be any need to," she replied. " You see, I—I could help a little towards the expenses. I think I might even be able to run to kidneys and bacon for breakfast, sometimes. You remember my mentioning Aunt Hetty, my godmother and Mummy's unmarried sister ? "

Michael nodded.

" Well she died when I was fourteen," Henrietta continued. " I'm afraid she left me between seven and eight hundred a year. It became mine absolutely when I was twenty-one."

Michael gasped.

" You, Mumps ! " he exclaimed, staring at her in amazement. He seized a stone and flung it petulantly down the hill. For perhaps a minute Henrietta, her heart throbbing, watched him gazing towards the distant hills with moody eyes.

" Mike," she said at last and very softly, laying a tentative hand on his shoulder—" Mike, you're not angry, are you ? Turn round and look at me."

He obeyed, his mouth set in a grim line and his eyes very troubled.

" Don't—don't look at me like that, Mike ! " she begged him, her voice tremulous. " Don't look as if you hated the sight of me."

" Hate you ? " he burst out fiercely, hunching up his knees and hiding his face in his hands. " I worship you, Mumps ! I've loved you ever since I met you at Hong-Kong. It's been agony. I—I—— Oh, curse the beastly money ! " he murmured incoherently. " I feel a cad—an utter cad. I suppose I ought to have known ; but I'll swear I didn't ! "

Henrietta, her face full of joy, leant forward and put her hand on his arm.

" Mike ! " she whispered. " Mike, listen to what I've got to say. Don't go on like that ! What does the horrid money matter to what I think of you ? What does it matter ? Mike, dear Mike ! " she continued

Digitized by Google

breathlessly, half laughing, half crying, "you say you love me?"

"God knows I do!" he muttered.

"I know it's most—most unusual for me to ask," she continued. "But will you—could you possibly overcome your objections to my b—beastly little income and m—marry me? Oh, say you can, Mike!" she implored. "I do want you so frightfully badly!"

She was very close to him. The scent of her hair was in his nostrils, and he looked up at her face to see her eyes misty and shining with something that he had never seen before. And suddenly, before he really knew it, his arms were round her neck and he strained her fiercely to him, showering kisses on her lips and face and hair and revelling in the nearness of her.

"Mumps!" he breathed, intoxicated with happiness. "Beloved Mumps! Most precious girl in all the world!"

She kissed him on the lips. Her heart and life were in his keeping.

H.M.S. "Telemachus,"
Egham, Surrey.
1921–24.

THE END

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA
3 0112 042260189